



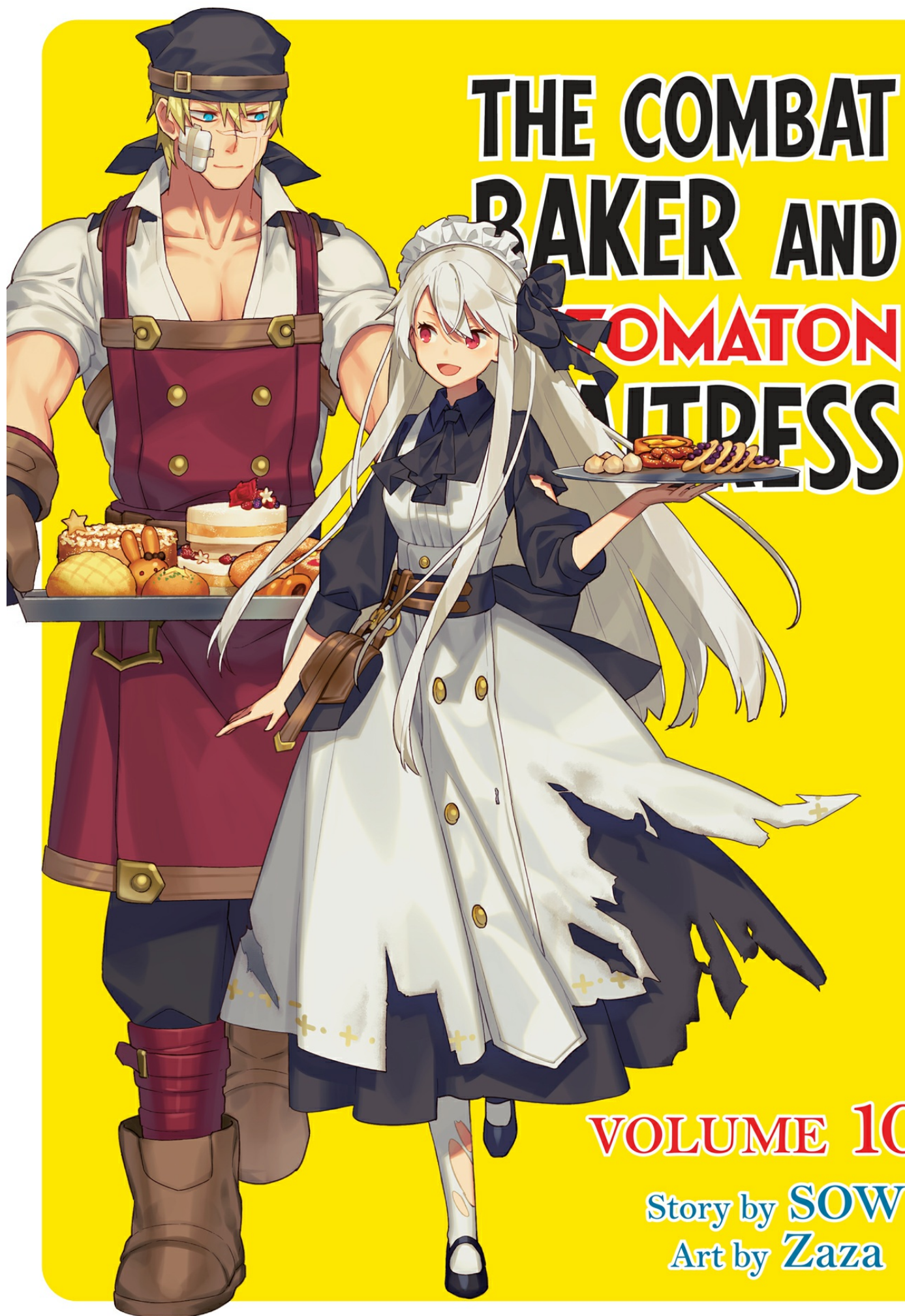
THE COMBAT BAKER AND TOMATON WAITRESS

VOLUME 10

Story by SOW
Art by Zaza

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



THE COMBAT BAKER AND TOMATO NAITRESS

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Story by SOW
Art by Zaza

Tockerbrot

“Oh,
do you?”
Lud’s reply
was brief.

“When you
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I want to
be an old
woman by
your side so
we can stay
together
like this.”

THE COMBAT
BAKER AND
AUTOMATON
WAITRESS 10

CHARACTERS

SVEN

One year after becoming the popular waitress of Tockerbrot Bakery, she has finally married Lud.

BLITZDONNER

A member of the intelligence agency known as Apuvea. He was in hiding but has since reunited with his family.

SOPHIA VON RUNDSTADT

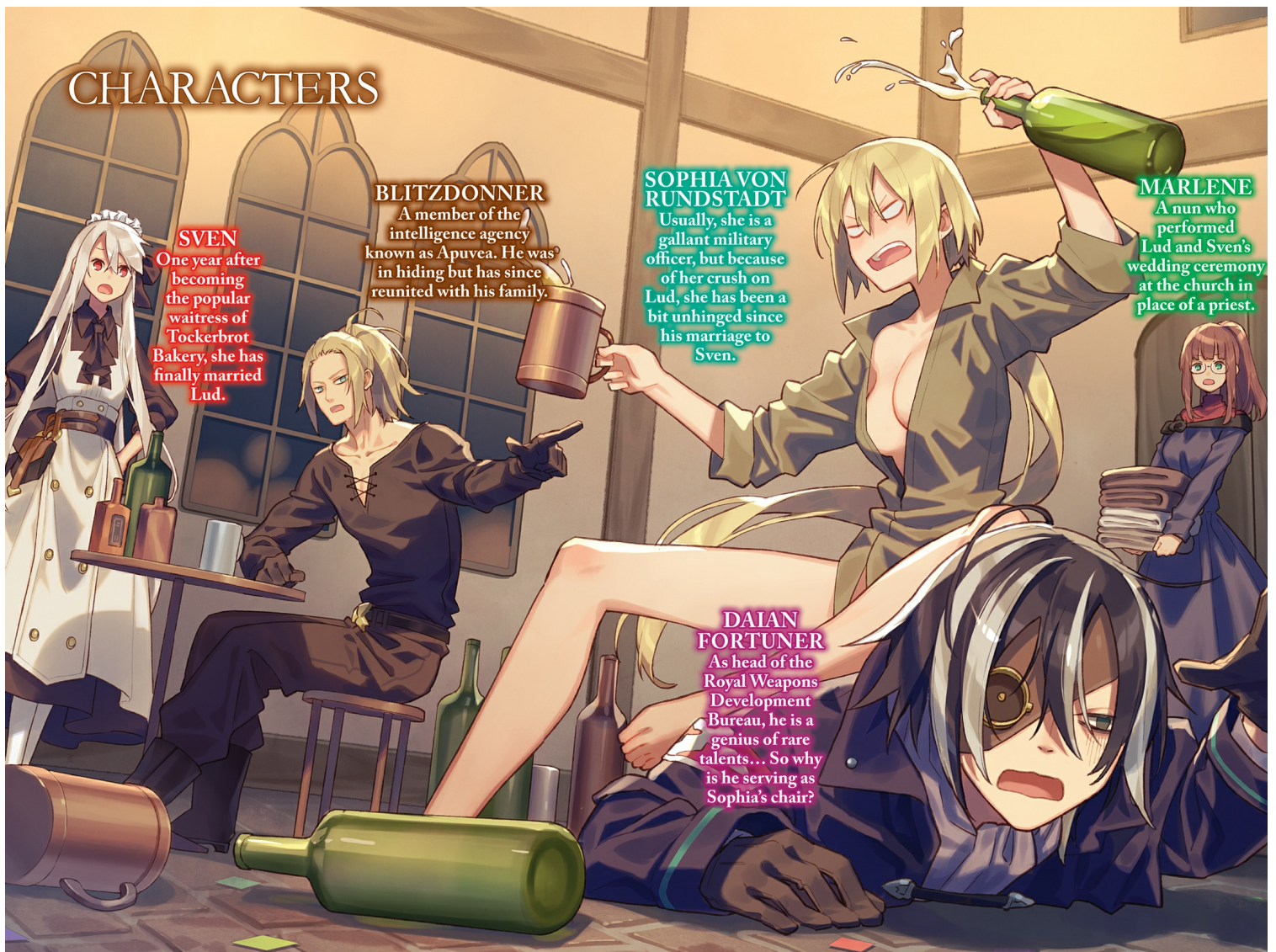
Usually, she is a gallant military officer, but because of her crush on Lud, she has been a bit unhinged since his marriage to Sven.

MARLENE

A nun who performed Lud and Sven's wedding ceremony at the church in place of a priest.

DAIAN FORTUNER

As head of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, he is a genius of rare talents... So why is he serving as Sophia's chair?





“Huh?”

“Hm?”

Encountering
her was an
accident.
However,
it was very
unfortunate.



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Prologue: Post-War Affairs

My name is Coco Vent d'Or. I was born in the Second Republic of Filbarneu and I am an investigator for a war history research center affiliated with the Society of Nations. I analyze records of the Second Great War, the largest war in human history.

The focus of the recent war was the Principality of Wiltia, which has since abolished the monarchy to become the Federation of Wiltia. It fought other major world powers and was defeated after seven years. The nation's government has greatly changed since then.

While researching the tumultuous events leading up to and during the war, I ran across the name of a certain individual. Lud Langart—the hero of the First Great War. After that war, he quit the military, so he did not participate in the Second Great War. Or so it seemed. But there was much about his actions between the two Great Wars that bothered me.

After his discharge from the military, Lud Langart opened a bakery in what is now part of the Pelfe Republic, but was part of Wiltia at that time. Two years later, he disappeared. This is not remarkable and hardly warrants concern. However, as I carefully examined historical records, I noticed that his actions before the war had been covered up. The nation went to great effort to falsify the official record regarding this baker. So I initiated an independent investigation. I began by questioning relevant individuals. What follows is the report of what I learned.

Introduction: On the Eve of Hostilities

Inside a dark room sat a round table surrounded by six chairs. This was the conference room of the Soviet Six, the August Federation's highest decision-making body. The Federation was a vast and powerful nation extending from Europea to Aesia. All decisions regarding August were supposedly made here.

"You've come back?" Mary Ville Mehl, seated in Chair Five, addressed a young girl who had appeared from behind her.

"Hm? What are you doing here?" The young girl who spoke was August's true ruler. She was known as the Saint.

"Nothing much. I'm new, so I was greeting everyone. Having finished that, I was taking a break," Mary Ville replied.

"Here?"

"....."

"Well, it doesn't matter."

Mary Ville remained silent, and the Saint didn't look interested. That's the way she was. She didn't care about humans. She didn't see human beings as *her own kind*. She didn't view them as individuals with their own thoughts and feelings and unique lives. She saw them merely as a species, as a group.

"The launch of *Verne 1* draws near. In five days... No, it's four days now." She referred to a new weapon whose very existence, if known, would cause the outbreak of hostilities. It would soon make its existence known.

"I was thinking about revealing *Verne 1* to the world to boost anti-Wiltian momentum, but..." The Saint spoke lightly, as if considering whether to eat chocolate cake or apple pie. "But I've decided to drop it. Where humans live."

"What?!" Mary Ville couldn't believe her ears.

"Why?! Or rather... where?!"

Even if she explained why, Mary Ville would never understand the girl's true

motives. So she just focused on learning where the Saint intended to drop the weapon.

“Makstia. Right here.”

“—?!”

Mary Ville was at a loss for words. The girl was going to fire a ballistic missile at the capital of the August Federation.

“It’s the perfect place. After all, this is an old city.”

Mary Ville wasn’t a scientist or engineer, so based on what little she knew, she had no idea how destructive the recently developed *Verne 1* would be. But it would be an enormous chunk of iron packed with fuel and explosives as it fell from the sky. So she could *imagine* the result.

“If you do that, it will throw Makstia... No, all of August into confusion!”

The missile would cause much more than physical destruction. In the recent Great War, Wiltia had surrounded the capital of August. Wiltia defeated the capital, which had natural defenses that even the Lion Emperor was unable to surmount over one hundred years ago. The loss to Wiltia had engraved intense fear in the hearts of the Augustan people.

“If we expose the capital to another crisis, this time about, imminent destruction at the touch of a button, there will be an uproar.”

“The people will panic.”

“Yes. And that’s where you come in.” The Saint spoke with a smile, as if explaining her plans for a party. “The members of the Soviet Six are decrepit already and this will finish them off. The people will cry out for help from *anyone*.”

If an attack struck the capital and the nation’s leaders disappeared, the thoroughly autocratic nation would be like a beast with its head cut off. Impossible to control, it would explode. In the worst case, the massive federation could break up, causing brother to fight against brother.

“That’s when you will make your appearance!”

“What?”

The Saint spoke enthusiastically, her eyes twinkling, but Mary Ville was perplexed.

“A heroine shall descend into a world directionless and wracked by confusion! As the nation’s savior, you will lead the masses in the fight against the evil empire of Wiltia!”

“.....!”

Mary Ville was a journalist, lawyer and novelist. This sounded to her like the plot of a mediocre novel. However...

It would be effective...

The methods for agitating the populace were surprisingly simple. Make it clear and easily comprehensible... That was the way to reach people eager to abandon the need to think for themselves. We are righteous and the enemy is evil. That simple scheme was enough to get people marching in step.

“When you think you’re right, you can do anything. Anything at all!” The Saint laughed in delight.

She had observed humans for hundreds of years, so—not a human herself—she understood them very well. Day after day they spouted strong, noble words, but at heart they were easy to manipulate. She knew from experience.

“Well, we’ll be busy!” The Saint clapped her hands and did a little dance. Apparently, she was having fun and eagerly looked forward to war.

Chapter 1: A Gamble with Long Odds

Lud and Sven were married. The two became husband and wife and chose to spend the rest of their lives together. That was why Sven wished for something else to change. She wanted to replace her mechanical body with human flesh and blood and to grow old and die with Lud. To make that wish come true, she decided to turn to Meitzer, the man who claimed to be her father.

Then... In a room of the small bakery Tockerbrot in Organbaelz...

After the wedding ceremony, Sven and Lud left the banquet early and returned to the shop, which was also their home. It felt like the first time they had been together in a long while. Meitzer had arrived days before, immediately followed by Sophia, Daian and Blitzdonner. Tockerbrot was a shop, but it was possible to have too many visitors.

“Master...”

But they were alone tonight, of course. The residents of Organbaelz weren’t so insensitive to not allow the newlyweds privacy on this special day and night.

“Sven, you don’t have to call me that anymore. Now we’re, um...”

“Oh... right.”

The two looked down in embarrassment.

Th-this isn’t good...

Sven was a maelstrom of emotions. When Lud had proposed and they swore their love for each other, she had been excited, but also surprisingly calm. As time passed and she returned to her senses the pounding of her heart wouldn’t cease.

They say one never knows what will happen in life, but until a few years ago, Sven had been the artificial intelligence inside a military weapon, so she had never imagined she would become an artificial human and marry her former pilot.

It's a little late to realize it, but I've done something incredible...

She had no regrets. Zero, zip, zilch. She was just thankful for her happiness, a joy that was more than she deserved. That's why she was afraid to tell him. She was afraid the iron hammer of God would fall to condemn her greed and foolishness in hoping for more.

"Um... uh... it's a little sudden, so... let me call you Master for a little while longer." She was stalling for time.

"Yeah, I see." Lud scratched his head in embarrassment.

He's precious to me...

Sven's emotion was so intense she nearly wept. Everything about him was precious to her. That was why she couldn't turn away from a certain reality.

"Master... I may be able to become human." She had to tell him about this possibility.

"What?" Lud was at a loss for words.

It was understandable. He had sworn to accept everything about her, whether she was machine or human, and he had committed his love to her on that basis. To tell him this on the very night they fulfilled those vows overturned previous circumstances.

"Become human... You mean your body?"

"Yes. My body is a machine frame encased in synthetic flesh, with pseudo body fluid running through it and no organs that resemble the human heart or brain. Instead, as you know, my source of power is a rezanium reactor."

Sven and her sister machines Rebecca and Lillie were categorized as humanoid Hunter Units. They were weapons reduced to the size and shape of human beings. Like a human being, Sven laughed, got angry, cried and loved, but she was pure machine.

She didn't need to eat, sleep or even breathe. She didn't age, so she didn't grow. Sven didn't know exactly how many years she would remain operable. Dying meant all her functions would stop and she would not restart, but she would stay as she was until then.

“I want to be a human being, the same as you.”

“Sven...” Lud spoke with great kindness at her touching determination.

“You don’t need to force yourself.”

“Master...”

Aw, this guy...

Sven could tell what he was thinking. Even among the people who had celebrated with them today, only a handful knew she was a machine. Those who knew or might have guessed included Daian from the Royal Weapons Development Bureau; Jacob’s father Blitzdonner, an intelligence agency operative; and Lud’s former superior officer Sophia, who was like a sister to him. No one else knew.

However, the day would come when the world would notice. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but what about in five years? Even when the young apprentice Milly and the boy Jacob grew into adults, Sven would remain unchanged. Someday they would notice. They would see she wasn’t human. Then people would look at Lud with suspicion.

He was worried about that, so... No, she *thought* he worried about that so he was reassuring her that she didn’t need to force herself.

Master is sensitive when it comes to these things.

Yet again she was impressed by how perceptive her partner was.

“Master, you don’t understand. I’m not saying this for the reason you think.” She didn’t want to be human out of fear of what people might think. “It’s because I saw Major Blitzdonner and Charlotte together.”

Charlotte was Jacob’s mother and Blitzdonner’s wife.

“They parted over ten years ago, but when they were finally reunited, they were as comfortable with each other as if they were together yesterday.”

The two had been estranged and Charlotte hadn’t even known whether Blitzdonner was alive or dead. Nonetheless, Charlotte had welcomed Blitzdonner home as if it were only natural. She had smiled with joy, despite the intervening time and even though they both had changed.

“I was envious. They are living their lives and aging together... and I realized that I want that too.” Sven took a step closer to Lud. She took his arm and they sat together on the sofa. “When you become an old man, I want to be an old woman by your side so we can stay together like this.”

Machines don't age or die. Humans fear aging and death. Sven wasn't human, and she desired both. Because there is death, there is also life. Because there is aging, there is growth. Wanting to be human and eventually die also meant she had a craving to *live* as a human being.

“Do you?” Lud's reply was brief.

That was enough for Sven to understand what he thought.

“Yes.”

Lud had sworn to accept everything about her, so he also accepted her desire to be human.

“But how can you do it?”

“Well, about that...”

Even if he understood she wanted to be human, the problem of how to accomplish it remained. If machines could simply become living organisms, tomorrow trucks would turn into cows.

“That man... The one claiming to be my father...”

“Meitzer?”

“He asked me if I wanted to be human.”

“He did?”

Meitzer had asked her as they said goodbye. That was why he had unexpectedly visited Tockerbrot. He wanted to confirm her desire to become a human being.

“I couldn't answer right away. The question was too big. But now I can answer, so...”

“Who is Meitzer?”

“Well...”

Meitzer had known the truth about Sven from the start, and he even understood parts of her that she didn't understand herself.

The name Douglas Meitzer was false. He used that name as the commander in chief of the army in Noa, a nation on the new continent. Sven and Rebecca had superhuman combat abilities, but when they had faced Meitzer together, they couldn't even scratch him.

"He, uh... took a direct hit from a grenade and remained unharmed."

Lud's face contorted as he remembered what had happened a few days ago. Tockerbrot had suffered extensive damage during the battle. Meitzer had stopped the blast with his own body, partially saving the shop.

"He wasn't unharmed. He was destroyed and then immediately revived."

For one moment, Sven had seen it. His body was broken, torn, and burned, but then miraculously healed.

"That man is a combination of the uncanny and bizarre. Having seen that, it seems quite likely that I can become human!"

"Yes, I see what you mean."

While they had no idea exactly what Meitzer was, and despite the fact that he was dangerously invulnerable, he had put himself at risk to protect Lud and Jacob that day.

"I don't know who he is, but he doesn't seem ill-intentioned."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes."

Lud thought back. Meitzer had helped Lud find the courage to accept everything about Sven. He might be a problem for Sven, but the way he looked at her was the way a true father would.

"Is there still time?" He looked at the clock on the wall.

"I'm not sure." Sven followed Lud's gaze. It was very late at night, but he might still be awake.

A short time later, Lud and Sven visited the church atop the hill. They wanted to consult someone else about what to do. But...

“Bring more alcohol!”

After the two central participants had left the wedding celebration, the attendees had set about drinking and singing.

“Stop her! Stop that woman!”

“I can’t watch any longer!”

The children Jacob and Milly had left, along with Charlotte, who had to work the next day. Only the adults fond of drinking and partying remained.

“Gueh!”

“Sh-she can hold her liquor!!”

“What?! Is that all you got?! Did I win?”

Amidst the guests now rambunctious with drink was Lud’s former superior officer Sophia von Rundstadt, who was wildly swinging around a bottle.

“Hey, Langart! What’s up? Why’d you come back?” Blitzdonner called out to the two from a distance, where he was guzzling liquor as if the tumult didn’t concern him.

“What’s going on here, Major?”

“Hmm?”

Blitzdonner hadn’t lost control of himself, so Lud thought the major could explain why Sophia was so out of control. Instead, the man responded with a face and voice that said, “Do you really need to ask?”

“Master, Major Rundstadt must have, um, strong pent-up feelings about everything that’s happened.”

“Oh... well, she is a responsible person.” Lud responded in agreement with Sven.

Blitzdonner looked exasperated.

“Your husband doesn’t get it.”

“Yes, he’s slow that way,” Sven replied with a resigned look.

Ever since she was a small child, Sophia had had a crush on Lud. But in the military, she was his superior officer. Allowing her emotions to disturb military order would have placed the two of them in danger, and others as well. She had thoroughly hidden her feelings, and had missed her chance to let Lud know how she felt about him. In the meantime, Lud met and fell in love with Sven.

“My master can guess what’s in another’s heart, but when he’s personally involved, he’s as thick as a brick.” She leaned close to Blitzdonner and whispered so Lud wouldn’t hear.

“Yup. That’s about right.”

Sophia was drinking because the crush she had nursed all these years had clearly ended and she was unable to stand it while sober.

“Just leave her alone. Sometimes a woman has to rely on a bottle to get things out of her system before she can move on.”

Blitzdonner looked young, but he was father to the eleven-year-old Jacob. He dispensed wisdom like someone much older.

“Spoken like a true playboy. But don’t go targeting desperate women!”

“I wouldn’t think of it!!”

Blitzdonner was the ace pilot once called the Crimson Hawk, but he was also known as a skirt chaser.

“Seriously. If I did that, Charlotte would... But it’s not just her! Jacob would never look at me the same way again!”

Jacob was finally treating him like a father, so he couldn’t afford to mess that up.

“Well, that doesn’t matter. Where is Director Daian?”

Daian had attended the wedding, so Sven and Lud assumed he had stayed for the banquet afterward. The two had come to speak with the genius scientist Daian Fortuner, also known as the Sorcerer. He might be able to explain what Meitzer meant about Sven becoming human.

“Oh, the science guy? The top brain we in Wiltia are so proud of?”

“Yes. Did he already leave?”

Daian wasn't staying in Organbaelz. His hotel was in the neighboring town. Sven looked around but didn't see him.

“Svelgen, look where I'm pointing.”

“Huh? Um... hey!”

Blitzdonner was pointing to where Daian was serving as a chair for the drunken Sophia.

“What are you doing, Director?!”

“H-Hi, Svelgen. Nice night, eh?”

“How can you make small talk in that position?!”

Daian had tried to stop Sophia from drowning her sorrows but had failed miserably. He had not only been unable to stop her from running off the rails but found himself trapped under her rump.

“I'd like to talk, okay?”

“Oh... you came back to talk on your wedding night? Then it must be important.”

“It is.”

“In that case, help me out of here.”

The world's foremost brain, a genius scientist whose influence extended even to national war strategy, was in a woeful predicament. They pleaded with Sophia to calm down and eventually resorted to dumping a bucket of water over her head, successfully freeing Daian a few minutes later.

“I almost made peace with harsh reality and achieved enlightenment,” Daian sighed.

“No, it looks like you're a total wreck!” Sven countered.

They moved to a back room of the church. The roof leaked, so the room couldn't even serve as storage, but there was no fear of anyone overhearing

their conversation.

“I’ll leave you alone.”

The nun Marlene, had taken them to the room. She had sensed without being told that they wanted to speak privately.

She’s quite admirable...

Marlene had once strayed in life, and Lud had saved her from the brink of death. She had special feelings for him, but unlike Sophia, she maintained her composure and had not fallen apart. Marlene wasn’t actually a nun, but she was as much a woman of God as a real clergywoman.

“Now what’s all this about? Meitzer said something about you becoming human?”

“Yes, that’s right. I thought you might know something.”

Daian had brought Sven into this world. His prodigious brain had earned him the nickname Sorcerer, so he was an object of fear both inside and outside Wiltia.

“Um, Svelgen? When people call me the Sorcerer, it’s just a metaphor. But what you’re talking about is like real sorcery and transcends science.”

Apparently, even the genius of the century thought turning a machine into a human being was fantasy rather than reality.

“But isn’t a certain someone fond of saying that advanced science is difficult to distinguish from magic?”

“This is why you amateurs are so difficult. Science is founded upon the distinction between what is possible and what is impossible.”

Blitzdonner had asked the question, but Daian shook his head in denial.

“Science begins with knowledge of the world’s laws. In other words, knowing what’s written on the cards God has dealt.”

Scientific thought examines how to use those cards to create something greater.

“Are you saying we can’t do that with the cards we have now?”

“Transforming a machine into a human being is on a whole different level. It’s like playing chess with cards. They’re completely different games.”

“Urgh...”

That’s how extraordinary the proposition was.

“But...”

Nonetheless, Lud didn’t want to rule it out, so he spoke up.

“Playing cards have a king and queen like in chess. So there are common points.”

“That’s just playing with words, Langart.”

Daian covered his face with his hands as if troubled, but he continued pondering the matter. Science could not judge with absolute certainty. There was always a possibility, because altering unknown conditions will generate new results.

“However...”

Daian had created Sven mechanically using technology. The origin of her mechanisms lay in technology from the ancient European Empire, which had fallen to ruin long ago. There were products of science infinitely close to magic—even though those weren’t Blitzdonner’s own words.

“I didn’t analyze every last bit of the ancient empire’s technology. Even now, there may be parts of it I don’t know.”

It was said that the ancient civilization built a tower to the heavens, crafted vessels capable of traversing the stars, and even conquered death. Some of those wonders were sealed inside relics called Doors. Discovering just a fraction of that technology had resulted in rapid scientific and technological advancement.

“Perhaps Meitzer has accessed that knowledge somehow. It’s possible.”

It was a problem for a scientist to fall back upon uncertainty, but that was all Daian could say at the moment.

“So the only way to know is to ask him.”

Without thinking, Sven expressed her disappointment.

“You’re surprisingly unhelpful.”

“Don’t be so mean.”

“Well, it’s true!”

Sven tried, but she couldn’t hide her dismay. Perhaps it was her nature as a former pilot-assistive A.I., but uncertainty made her more uneasy than it did human beings.

“No, it isn’t true.”

As if guessing how she felt, Lud placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Daian didn’t absolutely rule it out. Knowing that alone is enough. At the very least, you won’t be worse off than you are now, so it’s a gamble with good odds.”

“Master...” Lud’s reasoning was forced. Even though Sven knew that, it still soothed her. “I guess you’re right.” Sven replied with a smile.

She remembered that it was always this way. In war, a world fraught with uncertainty, Lud often said, “It’ll work out somehow,” and then had gone on to save her many times, ensuring their survival.

“Ha ha!” Blitzdonner laughed in amusement, as if guessing how their hearts communed.

“Why is everyone laughing?” Daian asked.

“Rundstadt treats you with scorn because you’re so clueless!”

“What?!”

The genius scientist had little understanding of the human heart, and none about relations between men and women, so he exclaimed in confusion.

“Now... in that case, it’s better to act soon. Shall we set out tomorrow?”

The proposal came from Blitzdonner. Ordinarily, they would have waited until the day after the wedding or even longer, but some circumstances require immediate action.

“I’m back!” Another voice joined theirs.

“Oh my! Where have you been, red girl?”

The new arrival was Sven’s sister machine Rebecca, a young girl who was entirely crimson, from her hair to the clothes she wore.

“I was on patrol.”

“What do you mean?”

Daian explained.

“Svelgen, I’m not bragging, but I’m a pretty important person. Enemy nations target me even when I’m at home, but if I leave my own country without informing anyone, Wiltia comes after my life!”

In the recent European War, the Hunter Units that Daian created led Wiltia to victory. Daian “The Sorcerer” Fortuner was influential in world affairs. Various organizations monitored his activity every day. Allies watched to make sure he wouldn’t betray them, while enemies sought an opportunity to kill him.

“This science guy leaves the royal capital and it’s a major happening.”

Blitzdonner stayed by Daian’s side because he was on a mission for the organization Apuvea to guard him.

“Due to certain circumstances, Blitzdonner and I were transported to Organbaelz, but a professional intelligence organization wouldn’t find it difficult to locate us in a few days.”

Daian had not immediately returned to Berun. Time in transit was perfect for assassination. If Daian traveled by train, blowing up one bridge would be enough.

“I was waiting for backup from the royal capital, but...”

As a safety precaution, he had sent Rebecca to scout the surrounding area. Not many human soldiers could surpass her ability to sniff out the enemy.

“I did not detect any spies,” Rebecca reported.

“That’s strange. I can’t imagine that my value would have suddenly plummeted. Nevertheless, given the facts...”

He could only come up with one answer: Both Wiltia and her enemies were involved in something so momentous they couldn't bother with Daian.

"The only thing that could light a fire in the royal capital right now would be Meitzer. If he did something... or if something happened to him..."

There was no time to waste.

"No backup is coming. Which means the royal capital can't make a move until the disturbance is over. There's no point in waiting. It's about time for *us* to make a move."

"I see..." Sven pondered Daian and Blitzdonner's words.

Some kind of trouble, and something fairly momentous, awaited them in the capital. For a moment, she considered giving up. Going would endanger not just her, but Lud. However, Lud spoke as if to ease her worries.

"Let's not hesitate, Sven. You've decided, haven't you?" He also wanted to reinforce Sven's wavering determination.

"Yes!" Sven answered, her resolve returning.

"Understood. Let's go home for tonight and make preparations. We'll regroup early in the morning."

Then...

"Wait! What're you planning without me?!" Another voice joined in. It was Sophia. She had sobered up after being doused with several buckets of water, but she was soaked.

"If you're going to the capital, I'm going with you! I won't let you say no!!"

"We didn't mean to cut you out, Sophia."

Daian was holding his head in exasperation.

"Well, if Langart, Rundstadt and I go, it should be fine."

There weren't many of them but if they ran into trouble, they packed a lot of power.

"Major, I'm going with you. Don't forget that!"

“Yeah, I hear you.”

Rebecca held on to Blitzdonner as he reassured her.

“Now...”

Sven looked nervous as she sensed they were walking into something more dangerous than she expected. It was the fifth day of what would later be known as the Earthshaking Nine Days.

Chapter 2: Ham and Eggs with Two Eggs

The two nations of Pelfe and Wiltia once shared a border. After Wiltia annexed Pelfe, they were unified and a rail line connected their two capitals. It would take surprisingly little time for Lud and the others to travel from their home in Organbaelz to the Wiltian royal capital of Berun. The journey would take less than two hours by air, and if they left by rail in the morning, they would arrive by evening.

An uncomfortable atmosphere enshrouded a corner of their railway car.

Chatter... chatter... chatter...

The other passengers showed a mixture of curiosity and fear. They were staring at a group of individuals who were clearly *different*.

"I just might be the most normal in this bunch," muttered Blitzdonner.

"What do you mean by that, Major Blitzdonner?" Sophia looked pale as she spun around to face him.

"After all, you..." Blitzdonner quickly averted his eyes.

The compartment held the four of them: Blitzdonner, the military officer Sophia, the bizarre and clown-like Daian, and the frightening Lud with his scarred cheek. That alone was enough to make a very strange group, but in addition, Sven and Rebecca—white and red beauties—were sitting in the compartment behind them.

"They have no idea who we are..."

Saying they were a group of traveling performers might have put the other passengers at ease.

"Yeah, well..." At a loss for a reply, Sophia just hung her head wearily.

"Rundstadt, are you all right?"

The late night of drinking was taking its toll, and Sophia was in the throes of a hangover.

“Agh! I totally failed!”

“Are you all right, Sophia?!”

“I’m fine!” As if to salvage her pride, Sophia answered with a show of strength, holding her splitting head.

“Sophia, don’t exert yourself. How about lying down?” Daian made his suggestion with a slightly exasperated voice.

One bench in a neighboring compartment was unoccupied. There was plenty of space for her to lie down.

“I said I’m fine!”

But that wasn’t a sufficient reason for a proud Wiltian military officer to give in and show weakness.

“Oh dear... Well, I don’t expect violence to break out here, so suffer as much as you like.”

Finding it pointless to force her, Daian shifted his gaze around the car as he spoke. His departure from the capital should have set various intelligence agencies in motion, but it didn’t appear that anything would happen right now. The situation was abnormal precisely because nothing abnormal was happening.

In that case, it was right to leave him behind...

Blitzdonner thought of his son Jacob. That morning, when Jacob heard they were leaving for Berun, he had asked to come along. In part, he asked out of pride because he was Lud’s first friend in Organbaelz. Blitzdonner had forcefully refused, and the boy had stayed behind at home.

“I wonder if Organbaelz is all right.” Lud looked worried as he spoke.

“It’s probably fine. Actually, it’s probably safer *without* you and me. It is ironic though...”

Terrorists controlled by an Augustan covert agent had once threatened Organbaelz because there was an unopened Door in the area. It turned out that the Door held nothing of value, at least not now. That fact was public knowledge, so there was no reason to breach the border to reach it.

“Besides, those two are still in Organbaelz.”

“Yes, those two... Um, Director? Who are those girls?” Lud asked Daian to explain.

“I’m sorry, but that’s a national secret, so I can’t tell you anything.”

Daian’s reply didn’t help.

“But they’ve got excellent skills. And we can count on them to discourage an attack.”

“?” Lud didn’t understand what Daian was saying and looked perplexed.

“Pardon, can I get by?” Lud was about to ask for more details when Sophia, looking pale, stood up. “I need to... take care of some business.”

After muttering, she tottered unsteadily toward the car’s lavatory.

“She’s got motion sickness on top of a hangover...”

“Well, getting it out will make her feel better.”

And with that, Blitzdonner and Daian said no more.

Meanwhile, the two girls they were just talking about were in Organbaelz.

“There wasn’t any need for us to stay here, was there?”

The “girl” named Lillie was complaining to the “girl” named Hilde inside the shop area of Tockerbrot.

“Who cares? There’s no reason to hurry back to the royal capital.”

After the attack a few days earlier, Tockerbrot’s walls were damaged, the glass windows were shattered and even the roof had caved in. The shop was lucky to have survived with no further damage after a gunfight inside and a shell exploding from a grenade launcher. Nonetheless, if it wasn’t repaired, one good rain would damage even the unharmed areas.

The carpenters Sven had hired were making a lot of noise as they worked, and Hilde was keeping an eye on their progress.

“We owe Lud Langart and the others a lot, so this is the least we can do.”

“But there isn’t much *to* do.”

“Take it easy, okay?” Hilde tried to soothe Lillie’s complaints.

A little over six months ago, Hilde had come to the bakery to kill Lud, but now she was very fond of him.

“Then do you want to go back ahead of me? I don’t mind, so—”

“No, I’ll stay as long as necessary! I’ll even become a permanent resident!” Lillie insisted immediately.

She had a powerful feeling of friendship for Hilde—so strong that Hilde shrank from its depth and intensity. For Lillie, leaving Hilde’s side was the greatest pain in the world. In any case, it was important for these two to stay in Organbaelz.

Although Lillie appeared to be the daughter of an average Wiltian household, she was actually on loan from Yamato, a nation allied with Wiltia. If anyone interfered with her, whether from Wiltia or another country, it would spark an international conflict. That was what Daian had meant by telling Lud that Lillie and Hilde’s presence discouraged any attack.

As long as they were there, Tockerbrot and Organbaelz’s safety was ensured. Furthermore, Hilde’s presence was necessary to keep Lillie from leaving. However, the two girls were not aware of the reasons behind those decisions. So, they engaged in this back and forth like a pair of comedians.

“You two should find an audience!” Jacob grumbled at them with a cross voice.

“What? Why are you so cranky?”

“Because they left me behind!” Jacob sighed.

He didn’t know why Lud and Sven had left for Berun. But he was a clever boy. He had guessed from their behavior that it was important. No matter what, he didn’t like being shut out of the problem.

“Ha ha...” Hilde laughed at him.

“What are you laughing at?!”

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking that you’re acting your age.”

“Don’t treat me like a child,” Jacob said, irritation adding to his crankiness.

“No, I mean you’re usually too mature for your age.”

Hilde understood a little about Jacob’s background. She was born into a family of fallen nobility and was herself a former member of the Schutzstaffel, so she had lived a complicated life. Jacob’s childhood was even more complicated. Perhaps that was why he was so mature for an eleven-year old.

“I’m relieved to see you act like a child sometimes.”

“That’s treating me like a child!” Jacob continued to glower.

“Hilde, did you hear why Lud and the others went to the royal capital?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Hilde didn’t think she *needed* to hear.

“Lud said he was leaving Organbaelz and you two in my care.”

Lud treasured both the town and the shop. He had entrusted them to Jacob, which showed how much he trusted him.

Sometimes there are things you can’t reveal precisely *because* you trust that person. Hilde was old enough to understand that.

“You really have changed,” Jacob told her.

“Really?”

Jacob couldn’t help but feel better when he saw the calm smile on the face of the girl who had once come to abduct him.

“Pardon me!” As they were talking, someone else joined them. It was Milly, Tockerbrot’s apprentice baker. “If you’re not doing anything, try a taste!”

Since morning, Milly had been holed up in the oven room baking bread.

“Wow... that looks gorgeous!”

Seeing the bread, which gave off a mouth-watering aroma, Hilde’s compliment wasn’t empty flattery.

“It hasn’t been even a full year since you started baking here!”

“Well, I wasn’t completely new to it.” Milly’s tone was slightly uncomfortable.

Her late father had also been a baker. He hadn't taught her the trade, but she had naturally picked up some experience from watching him. She had observed her father baking, so when Lud began instructing her, she had quickly understood. By following him, she had learned to bake roughly the same breads and pastries.

"I still can't sell anything I bake though. The shape isn't right and my bread didn't bake the way I intended."

Milly's dream was to have her own bakery someday. She had once thought about reviving her father's old bakery, but now she hoped to get Lud's permission to open her own branch of Tockerbrot.

"Lud said I can use the bakery's flour to practice, but only if everything gets eaten."

He had stipulated that condition so Milly would learn the value of the baking supplies she used.

"Since you men are here, would you try some too? It doesn't taste bad!"

"Oh! Can we?"

Milly gave some of her bread to the carpenters making repairs. She wasn't anywhere near competent yet as a baker, but like Lud, Milly knew the value of pleasing others with the work of her own hands.

"....." Jacob looked troubled as he looked at Milly.

"What's wrong, Jacob?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just..." Jacob's reply to Lillie was vague.

Everyone is changing...

It wasn't just Sven and Lud. His parents, Marlene, Hilde and Milly... Jacob sensed everyone around him had changed over the past year. One day, all the fun they were having was sure to end. No, that wasn't right. Something new would *begin*.

But what about me?

A feeling of both loneliness and impatience welled up inside the boy.

“Well, there’s no hurry,” Hilde said.

“As I said, you’re still a child, so you have time to think. If you hurry too much, you’ll fall like I did,” she continued with a wry laugh.

“Hey, don’t read my thoughts!”

“Ha ha ha!” Hilde laughed in amusement as Jacob frowned at how she had correctly guessed his feelings.



Lud and Sven arrived in Berun, the royal capital. First, they had to find lodging as a base to launch their search for Meitzer. Although his exact identity was unclear, as a general for the major nation of Noa, Meitzer was a man of significant social standing. He wasn't the kind of person a mere baker—whatever that baker's past—could meet simply because he wanted to. Their request for a meeting would be discarded before it could even reach Meitzer. However...

Some in their group had both official and backdoor connections that could be used to make contact. Daian was the director of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, Blitzdonner was an agent for the intelligence agency Apuvea, and Sophia had been in charge of Meitzer's security.

They hoped to get permission for a meeting in one day, but...

"What is the meaning of this?!" At their lodging, Sven raised her voice.

"Shouting at me won't help!"

They had received responses to two of their three requests. Rebecca had come that night to tell them that Daian's and Blitzdonner's requests had been denied.

"Whatever the circumstances, that's odd."

During Meitzer's visit to Wiltia, assassins from a rival nation tried to kill him. As events unfolded, he had hidden temporarily in Organbaelz. It would make sense if, now that he had returned, Wiltia would prevent encounters with anyone unknown in order to avoid another attempt on his life, but...

"The director and Major Blitzdonner are special, aren't they?!"

Even if official channels were closed, it should be possible to arrange a meeting unofficially.

"As I said, asking me won't help!"

Sven was gripping Rebecca's lapels and almost shaking her as she questioned the girl. Breaking free of Sven's grip, Rebecca responded.

"Like the director said, something inside the military... inside the Wiltian government, has caused confusion."

“What did you say?”

Rebecca had taken on the role of messenger because Daian sensed the situation was abnormal. Some kind of incident was rocking the royal capital, and all of Wiltia.

“Is that the reason he can’t have anything to do with us?” Lud asked, uncertainty on his face.

“No, something has happened to Meitzer himself.”

“He wasn’t killed, was he?!”

Sven shook in surprise. She had recently experienced the shock of having someone who had been alive and well one day, suddenly disappear from the world the next. Mary Ville Mehl was a lawyer with a past connection to Lud, but she had become embroiled in certain dangerous affairs and departed this world.

“We will see. The director is using his connections to find a way, but...”

“Something happened?”

Genitz’s face appeared in the back of Lud’s mind. The man had attempted a coup and almost conquered the royal capital. Was something on the same scale occurring now?

“What shall we do, Master?”

“Hmm...”

He might have said there was nothing they *could* do at present. That’s how powerless Lud’s group was.

“This leaves only Sophia’s request. It would be good if we could learn something.” Lud spoke softly in hope that their last connection would open a way forward.

Meanwhile, Sophia...

“General Douglas is missing?!”

“Keep your voice down.”

When Sophia visited Marshal Elvin in his office at Wiltian military headquarters to inform him of her return, he told her about Meitzer's abduction.

"But... why?!"

"I don't know. We had secretly assigned guards to go with him, but they haven't returned. I suspect they've been killed."

Two days had passed since Douglas Meitzer asked Elvin to allow him to visit the Association for Space Travel.

"I'm at a loss. Presently, we're negotiating with the embassy of Noa. We've ceased communications with the island itself, but we won't be able to cover it up for long."

Before Meitzer came to Wiltia, assassins had attacked and he had temporarily disappeared. The embassy of Noa had tried to hide that disgrace from Wiltia, and Noa had no recourse but to send a penguin in his place in order to buy time.

"I didn't think saving that penguin would mean they would pay us back like this."

Sophia thought it was ironic. Noa's ruse would normally be taken as mockery, and handled through official diplomatic routes. However, if dissidents kidnapped Meitzer in Wiltian territory, things were different.

"Well, I used the penguin disturbance as a pretext to buy some time, but... only three days. If we rescue Douglas Meitzer in that amount of time, they'll agree to act as if nothing happened."

"Three days? That's not long."

That schedule was too tight to investigate this abduction.

"....."

"Marshal?"

However, Sophia didn't see urgency on Elvin's face.

"Do you... by any chance have an idea about who did it?"

“Yes.”

Long ago, a strategist said that war was but one form of diplomacy. In diplomacy, cutting deals is paramount. Elvin had accepted the conditions because he already suspected who the abductors were.

“The Security Department did it.”

“So that’s where...”

It was the armed organization nominally used to preserve the peace at public facilities in the Principality of Wiltia. Due to its secretive nature, the investigation after the recent rebellion had not extended to this group, allowing it to become an enclave for many of Genitz’s followers. The members were war hawks who rejected peaceful methods and truly believed that if another war occurred, it would end with Wiltia ruling the world.

“In the recent Great War, our nation was victorious because Noa maintained its neutrality. It would be foolish for us to let the primary cause of our victory slip away.”

Elvin shook his head in exasperation.

“General Douglas said he wanted to visit the Association for Space Travel. I don’t know why, but apparently the unit is made up of Genitz’s supporters.”

Elvin had ordered a subordinate to investigate. The bizarre situation that came to light was dizzying.

“What are they thinking?”

Sophia was talented but serious—some would describe her as *stubborn*—so she couldn’t even imagine what this situation might be.

“A lower-ranking officer will explain further.”

At that moment, as if perfectly timed, an officer entered the room.

“Are you the Azure Shudder?!”

Sophia recognized the man. Wiltia had many ace pilots, but only some were given nicknames. Lud was the Silver Wolf and Blitzdonner was the Crimson Hawk. The nicknames raised the morale of their allies while breaking their

enemies' fighting spirit.

"Long time, no see. Major Rundstadt, I believe we haven't met since the ceremony celebrating our victory."

"Yes, that's right."

The Azure Shudder was the nickname of Leia Toolman, the man who stood before her. He had yet another name. The Bulletproof Baron. He was the captain of the guard unit serving directly under Marshal Elvin and was Elvin's right-hand man.

Sophia didn't think he surpassed her as a Hunter Unit pilot, but in combat ability as a soldier... During the post-war confusion, he completed many difficult missions and had come to be called the Bulletproof Baron.

"Hm?"

The military saber at his side rattled.

"This? The captain isn't comfortable with a European saber, so we ordered this from Yamato."

Yamato was the island nation off the far eastern edge of the eastern continent. In Yamato, they called sabers *katana*. In addition to their strength, they were as beautiful as works of art.

The sword hanging from Toolman's belt was from Yamato.

"I'd offer a more detailed introduction, but unfortunately, there's no time."

"Yes, I understand. Go on."

Prompted by Sophia, Toolman explained the situation.

"First, look at these."

He presented a number of documents. Among them was a page that looked like a blueprint.

"What's that?"

"The Security Department calls it *Verne 1*. Supposedly, it's a rocket."

"Rocket?"

“A rocket is a type of vehicle propelled by chemical fuel for enormous propulsion, and is capable of reaching outer space. This rocket, however, is for unmanned flight.”

Under the rubric of scientific and cultural progress, the Security Department had been providing financial support to the Association for Space Travel.

“How do they plan to use it?”

“Major... once launched, this will indeed fly into space, but depending on its trajectory, it could cross national boundaries and directly attack distant enemy nations.”

The impact of science and technology could be both a positive and negative. A deadly poison, if weakened, could be a medicine.

The rocket developed by the Association for Space Travel was a new weapon, never dreamed of by anyone in Wiltia, the entire continent of Europea, or anywhere in the world. It was a long-range ballistic missile.

“What? And those people are trying to build one?!”

“No.”

Sophia was gripped by shock and revulsion as Toolman continued.

“They’ve *already* built one, and they’re going to launch it in three days.”

“That’s incredibly dangerous!!”

If they launched such a missile, it would set off chaos around the world. What had started the recent Great War was a shooting committed by a single unruly youth in a small nation. This time, the spark for a Second Great European War would be Wiltia.

“If they actually use this as a missile, where would they drop it? I suppose it would be August.”

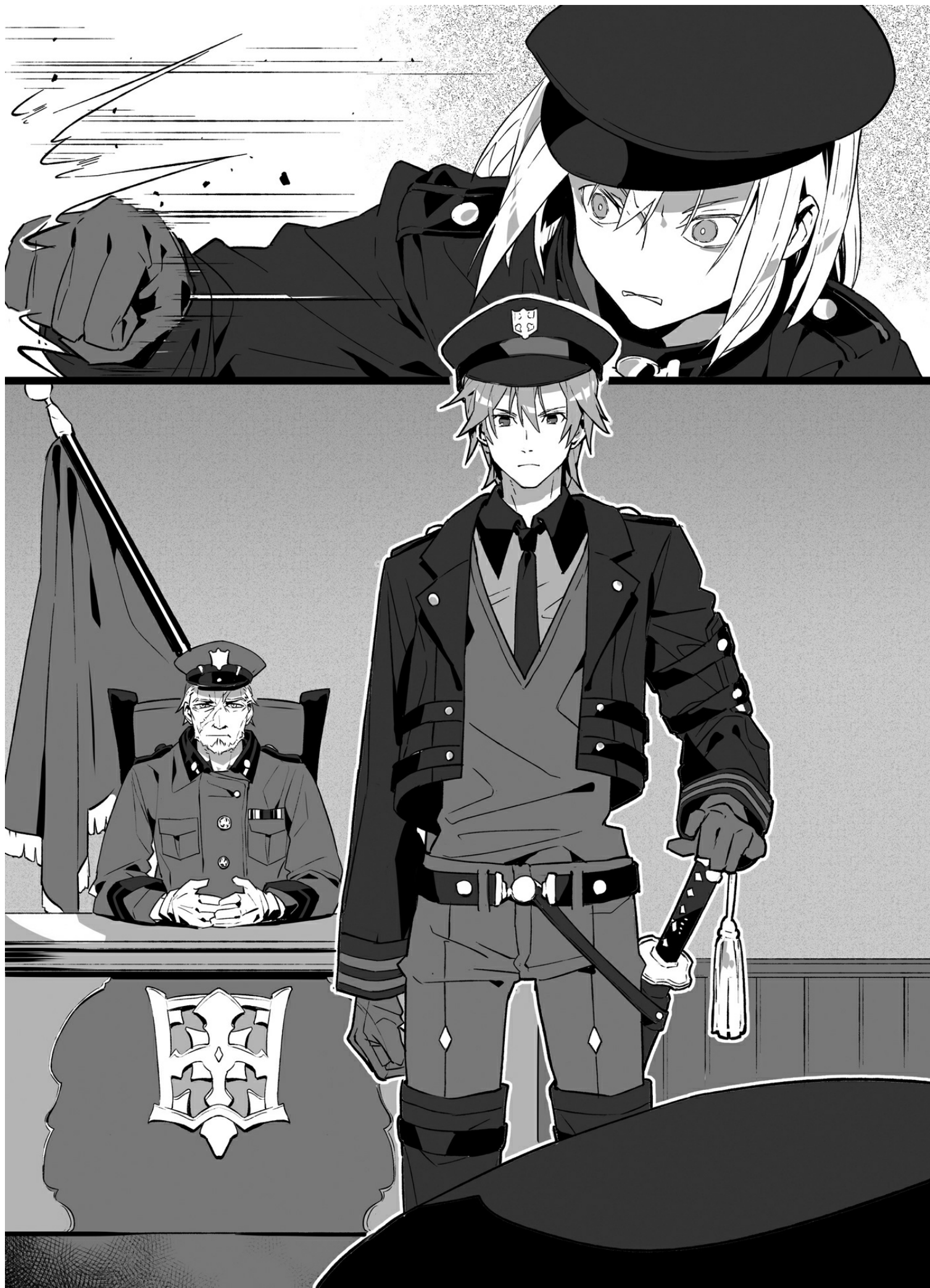
August and Wiltia had signed a cease-fire but not a peace treaty. When it came to international treaties, their relationship was as fraught as if they were still at war.

“Can they do that?”

“We can only estimate from the blueprint, but a specialist said it’s quite possible.”

“Argh!”

Without thinking, Sophia hit the wall. If the marshal hadn’t been there, she would have kicked the desk and pulverized it.



“That’s right, Rundstadt. They were desperately hiding this information, but during the last few days their guard has dropped.”

Because there was no longer any need to hide it.

“We must stop the Security Department from stirring up trouble. We must rescue General Douglas, stop *Verne 1* from launching, and make it appear as if nothing happened.”

Sophia nodded quietly at the marshal’s words. They could not allow this threat to go unchecked.

“Their facility is twenty kilometers from Berun in a rural town called Penmunde. I will send a unit of rangers to suppress them immediately.”

Next, Toolman handed her orders.

“Major Rundstadt, I want you on the team. Is that all right?”

“You don’t need to ask.”

Sophia was a military officer. She was a career soldier, so fighting was a way of life. However, precisely because she was a professional, she hated unnecessary battles and knew the value of life. She despised anyone who caused war and involved innocent civilians because they liked it.

“Oh...” Sophia remembered something. “Captain Toolman, I have a request.”

“Yes, what is it?”

Toolman’s rank was lower than Sophia’s. However, Marshal Elvin was responsible for this operation and he had entrusted the captain with full authority.

“There is someone I would like to add to the team.”

Sophia was making a request instead of giving an order.

“You probably know him. I would like to take Lud Langart.”

Meanwhile, Meitzer...

“Now let’s see...”

He was alone, confined to a stone cell without a window.

“This construction is classic. I’m surprised buildings like this still exist.”

His hands and feet were bound, so while his treatment didn’t qualify as torture, it was far from humane. He had come to the edge of Berun to visit the Association for Space Travel. With their cover as a social club researching how humankind might advance into space, they had concealed research and development into space rocket technology that could be used for military purposes.

“Is anyone there? I want to talk.”

Meitzer had guessed that the person behind it all hoped for a new war. He had plunged in alone to convince them to give up their plans.

“There’s still time, but once your activities are known, your lives will be forfeited,” he had warned them.

But that had failed. Their reach was greater than he thought. They had taken him prisoner and drugged him. When he regained consciousness, he found himself in this cell.

“Are you awake?”

Several men and women appeared. There were no guards outside his cell, but they had come so quickly, although the cell looked like a regular room in an old castle, there must be hidden surveillance cameras and microphones.

“General Douglas, it is an honor to meet you.” A man who was perhaps the group’s leader spoke to Meitzer in an oily tone of voice.

“You know my name?”

His name was Douglas Meitzer. This man knew the identity of a general in Noa’s army, and he had captured and imprisoned him. That meant these people had full knowledge that their actions could cause a diplomatic and military conflict.

“Then what should I call you? I don’t care if you use a false name.”

“Oh, how rude of me. I am Hitzinger, chief of Security Department headquarters.”

Surprisingly, the man offered his name and organization. He said it so casually that Meitzer almost suspected it was false.

“I wish you were lying.”

But it was true. It was dark with no moonlight, but the man held an antique lantern in his hand. The lantern lit his face and it was Hitzinger, the chief of the Security Department, whose face Meitzer had once seen in secret documents.

“I’m surprised that I’m meeting Genitz’s successor like this.”

Six months ago, Genitz instigated a large-scale rebellion that threw the royal capital into turmoil. Genitz was no longer alive, but his subordinates were stationed all around Wiltia, including inside the military. Their effective leader was this man with a creepy reptilian face—Hitzinger, chief of Security Department headquarters.

“Do not misunderstand. I don’t pretend to fill our deceased leader’s shoes. I merely want to complete the work he was unable to finish.”

“You mean by pulling the trigger on the Second Great European War?”

Genitz’s goal had been to rule Wiltia himself and start a new war. He wanted to conquer not just the continent of Europea, but Noa and Aesia, among other places, and create a single nation comprised of all humanity—the first since the ancient European Empire.

It was a delusion. A giant delusion. Even if he wasn’t able to achieve that goal, Genitz had possessed the talent and know-how capable of throwing the world into chaos.

“I see... You cannot be his successor.”

Looking directly into Hitzinger’s eyes, Meitzer was certain. Unlike Genitz, this man had no vision. Why did he want to start a war and what did he hope to achieve by doing so? Genitz had at least understood his own goals. Meitzer knew what Genitz was after and how he had transformed his ambitions, bordering on megalomania, into action.

“Hitzinger, you lost your leader, so you’re chasing a ghost to fill that void. Trust me. You should stop.”

Meitzer knew it was a waste of breath, but he warned Hitzinger anyway.

“.....”

Hitzinger didn't reply. However, the air around him grew tense. While he didn't lose his scornful smile, it was obvious he was uncomfortable and angry.

He's a third-rate actor, too...

Meitzer had never met Genitz face-to-face, but from what he had heard, Genitz would never have revealed his emotions. In a way, this man Hitzinger was pure. And that was why he would not stop. He believed, and would accept nothing to the contrary.

“I doubt I can get through to you, but you're being manipulated. *Verne 1*? If word gets out that you launched that missile, even as a test, animosity toward Wiltia will quickly spread!”

The Security Department was conducting a rocket launch experiment. That was their story. In truth, they were testing the ballistic missile's automatic attitude control and inertial guidance to drop it via sub-orbital flight.

“Wiltia must be strong. The strong have the right to dominate the weak. No, they have the *obligation* to lead the human race!”

Hitzinger repeated his empty words like a parrot.

“As you know, August to the north is gradually encroaching on our territory. While we've been downsizing the military, drunk on peace, they've been advancing! What we're doing is *defensive*!”

“You fool...”

They were giving in to a military provocation. War was but one form of diplomacy. But, it was a fight. When your opponent sets the pace and you echo its mood, it was natural to see the situation as already dangerous.

“Once Wiltia stands tall, we will get approval from many other countries! When they see the power of *Verne 1*, they'll rush to us on their own!”

Even if Wiltia made this show of great force and gained vassal states, in order to lead, it would have to maintain and continue demonstrating that force. Wiltia didn't have that much power. It simply had a larger population, more national

territory and greater production capacity.

“So what do you want from me?” Meitzer realized talking was pointless, so he changed the subject. He merely wanted to know why they had taken him captive and why they let him live.

“You’re a hostage, material for negotiation.”

“Huh?” Without thinking, Meitzer blurted his surprise at Hitzinger’s response. “Surely you don’t think if you hold me hostage Noa will take Wiltia’s side.”

Meitzer was the top-ranking officer in the army of the great nation of Noa. His influence extended throughout the whole army.

“Don’t be foolish! It’s a soldier’s duty to defend his country. No nation would go to war to protect a soldier!”

“That may not be true. Noa has long remained neutral, but once it sees the power of *Verne 1*, they may think differently. Furthermore, if you convince them, it will all go well.”

“You must be either stupid or insane!”

A tower of building blocks would have a stronger foundation. It was one thing not to be choosy about your means in order to secure certain ends, but if the means were too unscrupulous, it would merely generate panic without gaining any allies.

Fear was an effective means of control, but too much could inspire resistance. A cornered rat will bite the cat.

“How long have you been working on this plot?” Convincing them to stop was already impossible. Meitzer accepted that he was unable to make them realize their folly, so he asked one final question.

He had told few others that he was visiting the Association for Space Travel. Only the Wiltian military marshal Elvin, whom he had asked to serve as intermediary to the Association, knew of his plan. However, Elvin was at odds with the Security Division, making him more of an enemy than August in some ways. Yet someone had leaked his activities to the outside.

“You...”

He saw the answer before Hitzinger could tell him. He saw the young woman by Hitzinger's side.

"Marissa... was it *you*?"

Sophia's subordinate in the guards at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau—Corporal Marissa Haven. She had been Meitzer's guide, and because she had been taken hostage, he let himself be seized without a fight.

"Yes, allow me to reintroduce her. She is an agent of the Security Department, planted in the Weapons Development Bureau. She's what you would call a spy."

Hitzinger's words, spoken as if revealing a treasured secret, surprised Meitzer.

"She informed us of your every move. You even came without a struggle to spare her from harm. I thank you for that, Corporal. As your superior officer, I must express my gratitude."

Marissa looked embarrassed, while beside her Hitzinger laughed merrily.

"I see. So I'm a fool." Meitzer sighed and that was all he could say.

"Now, General Douglas Meitzer, you must think calmly about what comes next. The sooner Wiltia forms a firm military coalition the better it is for Noa as well."

Hitzinger then left, along with his subordinates. However, Marissa stayed.

"Um, General Douglas?"

"Aw, who cares. Argh... I'm old and losing my edge." Marissa looked troubled, so Meitzer made light of the situation. He was proud in his belief that no ordinary intelligence officer could trick him. So, it was only natural that a very unspy-like spy got the better of him.

No, that isn't all...

He couldn't let a girl about the same age as Sven die, even if their personalities were different.

"I'm always like this. Something similar happened before."

Without thinking, he got a faraway look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t apologize.”

If Hitzinger knew she felt guilty, there was no telling what he would do to her. It was a strange sight to see: Marissa was crying and apologizing now that her identity was known and the man she had betrayed was consoling her.

“Um... at the very least, is there anything I can do?”

“Yes, but what you can do is very limited.”

The cell had no window. Or there *had* been a window but it was covered. That way the prisoners wouldn’t know where they were.

“You can’t undo these bonds, can you?”

“No, I don’t have the key.”

“I thought not.”

The only other thing he could request was a decent meal.

“Then I want ham and eggs for breakfast. Two eggs.”

“All right, I’ll see to it.”

Seeing Marissa on the verge of tears made Meitzer sad. Marissa probably wasn’t a professional spy. Most likely, she had met someone from a key organization and was either bought with money or pressured into helping. Because of her poverty, she had been enticed to cooperate although she would ordinarily have refused. When Meitzer considered her situation, he found it even harder to hate her.

“Oh, but...”

“Yes?” Marissa continued talking as Meitzer thought. “I can’t bring you a metal knife and fork.”

“That’s all right.”

Only wooden utensils were allowed to prevent prisoners from using the metal to escape. That was basic. There was no need for her to say it. He already knew.

“However, I can bring a *paper napkin*.”

“Oh?”

Meitzer didn't know what she was hinting at, so he responded with a perplexed look. However...

“.....”

Meitzer noticed something in Marissa's expression.

“I see...”

Then, with a smile, he made one further request.

“Marissa, would you lend me the pen in your breast pocket?”

She did not refuse.

Chapter 3: This Is Not War

The next morning, Sophia visited Lud and the others at their lodging, where they had greeted the morning without much rest. Sophia said she needed to talk and they suggested doing so at the breakfast table while eating, but she refused the offer. Instead, Sophia hung her head low and made a fist.

“I’m sorry.”

Her voice was full of frustration and regret.

“Sophia, what happened?”

Sophia replied to Lud’s question by telling him the Security Department was planning to test a ballistic missile and had abducted Meitzer. She added that the regular military was sending a special combat unit to stop the test and retrieve Meitzer. Furthermore...

“I also asked permission for you to come, but I was refused.” Sophia spoke in a strained voice and looked tense and unhappy.

She had asked Toolman, the captain of the special combat team, for Lud and Sven to join the operation. However, his answer had been extremely cold.

“There’s no way I can allow that.” Toolman had curtly cut her off in a tone that allowed no argument and was inappropriate toward a superior officer. “I know Langart, and I know he’s a capable man. However, he has quit the military.”

Some retired members of the military remain on reserve for emergency musters. Lud, however, was not in the reserves.

“This mission requires the utmost secrecy. We don’t know who Langart has come into contact with since leaving the military, and we haven’t examined his current situation. We cannot trust him.”

Sophia couldn’t say, “Do you doubt my subordinate?!”

Toolman was correct. To press further would be to involve personal matters. A fundamental tenet for the success of an operation was removing even the slightest worrisome element. Toolman wasn't wrong.

"I hear Langart is living in a rural area as a baker now. If you care about him, shouldn't you let him lead his peaceful life? Or... is there some reason he should come with us?"

Sophia couldn't answer that question. Meitzer claimed to be Sven's father. However, Sven was officially a weapon that had escaped from a military research facility. That was as big a problem as *Verne 1*.

"I see. Understood. I apologize. Forget I mentioned it."

Sophia was unable to press the matter any further.

"I'm sorry, Lud. I wanted to take you with us, but..."

Sophia was frustrated because she had been useless to her former junior officer and old friend. That wasn't all. She and Sven had often tussled, but Sophia didn't dislike the girl. On the contrary, she respected Sven for standing up to her and even came close to trusting her to make Lud happy. She felt worthless because of her inability to satisfy their expectations.

"Pay it no mind, Major Rundstadt."

However, Sven expressed consideration for how Sophia felt.

"Major, it's understandable a logical opponent would verbally win against a hothead like you."

"Who's a hothead?!"

"Heh heh heh..."

"Urgh!"

Sophia had been looking down forlornly, but now she looked up.

"It can't be helped, Sophia. I used to be in the military too, so I understand."

"I'm sorry..."

Now she was open to Lud's consoling words.

“Can you tell us who the enemy is and where they’re holding Meitzer?”

“Erm... those are military secrets.”

Sophia couldn’t tell any civilian about a problem tightly bound to a political affair.

“This is hardly compensation, but trust me. I won’t fail to rescue Meitzer and arrange a meeting with you.” Sophia ensured Lud and the others she would do everything she could. “Hmm... It’s time. Sorry, but now I must hurry.”

Out front, the horn sounded from the vehicle waiting for Sophia. There wasn’t much time before the operation would begin. She had come to apologize to Lud and Sven in the little time that remained.

“Good luck with the mission.” Sven saw Sophia off with those words. “I guess we just have to wait.”

After Sophia left, Sven and Lud thought again about what to do next. There was nothing Lud’s group *could* do now. He had left the military and hoped to live a new life, so it was ironic that his choice should lead to limitations such as this.

“Hm?”

There was a knock on the door. They thought perhaps Sophia had forgotten something, but it was Rebecca who came in.

“Oh, the red girl. What’s up?”

“Stop calling me that, Svelgen.”

Lud and Sven assumed she came with a message, and indeed she tersely delivered one.

“The director wants to see you. Come to the development bureau right away.”

“Has something happened?”

“I can’t tell you. Actually... I don’t know myself.”

If she merely needed to summon them, a phone call would have sufficed. While phones had yet to spread throughout Wiltia, each district in Berun had a

few installations. It was much faster than dispatching messengers.

“I see...”

This situation required summoning them in a way that could not be wiretapped.

“Understood. We’ll go at once.”

Staying at their lodging wasn’t accomplishing anything. They prepared to depart and set out with Rebecca for the Royal Weapons Development Bureau in the northeast area of the royal capital.

Led by Rebecca, they arrived at the development bureau one hour later. This was where Sven was “born.” However, the place had troubling associations for Lud.

“This way, please.”

When it came to military secrets, this facility contained more than a few. Nonetheless, the two were able to enter with the most perfunctory of procedures, without even a body search.

“Isn’t security a bit lax?” Sven muttered without thinking.

“Don’t misunderstand, Svelgen. It’s because you’re with me—and because Major Rundstadt isn’t present.”

“Oh, right. She’s in charge of security here.”

Sophia was called the Devil’s Black Spear, but she was also known as the Dragon Slayer. She had earned that name with her fierce glare. No enemy escaped her gaze and she possessed impressive defensive skills.

“If the major had been here, even you would not have been able to enter the area housing the director’s office without going through the regular procedures.”

Now they understood why Rebecca came to get them immediately after Sophia’s departure. When Daian learned that Sophia was leaving the royal capital on the mission, he hurriedly summoned Sven and the others “while the demon was gone.”

“That’s the Sorcerer for you. No one can beat him when it comes to sneaky methods.”

Sophia usually had Daian under her thumb, but he held onto control where he could.

“Svelgen, you mustn’t talk like that in front of the director.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Daian was one of the most important people in the nation. The military treated him as it would a colonel.

“He’d be happy to hear such things.”

“Is that how you see it?!”

However, he was also a twisted individual and a real pain in the butt.

“This way. Director, we’re coming in.”

They had walked deep within the development bureau and finally entered Daian’s office.

“Sorry for calling you here. Langart... and Sven. I suppose this is a homecoming for you.”

“It doesn’t really feel like it.” Sven shrugged at Daian’s glib chatter.

“Yes, I suppose it’s more like a maternity ward for you.”

Sven just thought of it as the place where she was born.

“For Langart, however, that isn’t true.”

“You know?”

“People everywhere owe me something. In return, information reaches my ears.”

A “friend” of Lud’s had once died here beneath the Weapons Development Bureau. The man’s name was Genitz. He had been both friend and foe to Lud.

“Director, did you call Master here so you could needle him about the past?”

“Certainly not. However, I too am human, so I remember whether I want to or not.”

“What do you mean?”

Sven admonished Daian for bringing up a matter that was so sensitive for her master, but she did not understand the importance of his words.

“I’ve got some info. I know where Meitzer is. However, the situation is extremely tricky.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s a tale that will make you dizzy.”

Daian gave them a succinct rundown of the key points. The two learned that the Security Department was conducting experiments to develop a new weapon that threatened to instigate another war, and Meitzer was now caught up in it.

“What a stupid thing they have done.”

Lud was at a loss for words. He had been at war for ten years and it had finally ended just two years ago.

“Are you saying another war is going to break out?”

It was the worst nightmare they could imagine.

“Genitz left behind some troublemakers. Actually, they may be *worse* than he was.” Daian sighed as if he agreed.

Genitz had a reason for staging the rebellion in the royal capital. By starting a war, he intended to achieve certain hopes and ideals. He had wanted to establish a unified nation before science and technology developed to the point that humanity could be destroyed beyond recovery. That alone might appear delusional, but at least it was better than believing war itself was the goal.

“Meitzer tried to stop that plan and they took him prisoner.”

“Why would he do that? Or rather... how in the world did they capture him?!”

Sven knew how indestructible Meitzer was, so she found his captivity hard to believe.

“It seems he was with a female soldier, a regular soldier. They took her hostage. Apparently, Meitzer is quite the gentleman.”

“Oh.”

Sven’s face took on a conflicted expression upon hearing those words. She used to think it was the height of folly to take a job as a soldier, in full awareness you might die, only to then cling to your life and expose the nation to danger. Now she was slightly relieved the man claiming to be her father had chosen to preserve this one life.

“I suppose Meitzer would prioritize stopping the *Verne 1* plan over his own life.”

“Yes, indeed.” Daian’s reply to Lud was brief.

Meitzer had probably gone to the Association for Space Travel alone and without personal security because he wanted to halt the plan quietly before it became an international conflict. That had not gone as expected and in fact the situation was now much more serious.

“In other words, we have to stop the *Verne 1* launch test if we want Meitzer to tell us how Sven can become human.”

“Yes, that’s right. What should we do?”

Lud had only one answer to Daian’s question.

“We have to stop it.”

“But, Master... this must not put you in danger!” Sven’s voice rose to a near shriek.

If Lud was still a soldier back in the military, it would be different. Lud was an ordinary baker now. He was a civilian. He should be protected, and was someone with the right to avoid danger.

“Sven, I was happy about our wedding three days ago. The townsfolk came to celebrate with us.”

“Huh? Uh, yeah...” Sven was baffled by the sudden change in topic.

“They suffered greatly in the war. Marlene and Jacob too. They all suffered.”

Many people had suffered and were injured, had been sad and struggled, and some had even lost their way and gone astray. Nonetheless, they gradually got

back on their feet and eventually were able to celebrate the happiness of others.

“They were joyful because we are happy, so I don’t want to see them suffer.”

“Aw...”

Sven’s shoulders slumped. She thought about how this man never changed. His good nature was bottomless. If someone was unhappy, he couldn’t be happy either.

“Ha ha ha ha!” Listening to them, Daian laughed in amusement. “You married someone incredible, Svelgen!”

“Shut up, you!”

Usually, a bad husband was one who made his wife suffer because he wouldn’t work and was always off gallivanting—drinking, gambling and visiting brothels. However, Lud was the type of husband who inspired suffering of a very different type.

“I had no idea the situation would blow up like this!”

She wanted to become human, but who would have guessed it would lead to stopping the outbreak of war?

“Then we’ve reached a decision. Shall we go to where Meitzer is being held... the new weapon test site known as Penmunde?”

“But how do we get there?”

Penmunde’s location was within Sven’s databanks. It was a seaport on Wiltia’s northern edge. It was far from the main highway and no train passed through.

“Ha ha ha... Svelgen, you underestimate me.” Daian hummed merrily and behaved like a clown. “Come with me!” Then he led them toward the development bureau’s inner courtyard.

The Royal Weapons Development Bureau’s nickname was “the Snail.” Each area was independent, and the experiments being conducted within grew more important the deeper inside you went. The inner courtyard was at the halfway

point. It was called a yard, but there was no grass anywhere. What they found was exceedingly strange.

“I’m not called the Sorcerer for nothing! I’m no magician, so I can’t turn a pumpkin into a carriage, but I can easily give you a ride to the ball!”

It was an airplane. But, it was a very odd airplane. For one thing, it had three wings. Two wings made sense. Four wasn’t out of the question. However, with wings extending in three directions, this plane could never achieve enough aerodynamic lift. Another strange thing about it was that the central vertex was *vertical*. This would never allow the gliding necessary for takeoff.

“What is that?”

At the sight of this object, which appeared to be a joke or crazy avant-garde art, Sven could find no words.

“Oh? Don’t you know what this is, Svelgen? It is a vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. I call it a Triebflügel.” Daian spoke as if saying “Tadaaa!”

“Vertical takeoff and landing?”

As its name suggested, it was an aircraft that took off and landed vertically. A traditional aircraft required a long runway for take off and landing. However, with a vertical takeoff and landing aircraft, a runway was unnecessary. It could be parked anywhere. If desired, it could even depart from and land on the deck of a warship.

“How does this thing fly?”

“It gains propulsion from three ramjet engines on the wings.” Daian explained as if he had been waiting for Sven’s question.

“Oh, that’s why it has three wings!”

When thrusting vertically from underneath, three points would create higher stability than one or two.

“No, you don’t understand.” Daian shot down her conclusion. “Each engine rotates horizontally, spinning the wings and thereby generating lift.”

“Huh?!”

She thought the wings were in a weird place, but the way it lifted off was strange too. In other words, the whole thing was like a giant propeller.

“How did you arrive at such an idiotic design?”

“According to my calculations, this is more stable.”

“What?”

She was unable to overlook a certain piece of missing information.

“Um... Director? Have you test-flown this aircraft?”

“There are no problems with any part of it.”

“Have you actually flown it?”

“I did perform a test takeoff with a mock-up.”

“I’m asking if you actually got inside, flew it, and landed!”

“Wa ha ha ha ha!”

“You can’t blow this off with laughter!!”

The aircraft had never been flown.

“Well, what do you want? This is the fastest aircraft I have on hand! I’m telling you, even I would find it difficult to borrow an aircraft from the military!”

Daian’s connections might pay off in time, but they only had two days. Toolman’s special combat unit, including Sophia, would travel by rail and military truck. They needed to get to Penmunde before that group and rescue Meitzer. There was only one option.

“Understood. We’ll use it.” Lud accepted Daian’s proposal.

“You finally decided? Prep is complete, so hurry and climb in!”

As if waiting for Lud’s reply, the hatch opened and a man appeared.

“Major... so *that’s* where you were?”

Blitzdonner appeared from the cockpit.

“If not me, then who can fly this gobsmacking contraption?!”

The crimson daredevil grinned at them. He had fought since the early days of

the Great War, and even now he belonged to an organization that sent him on dangerous missions. In expectation of all types of combat, he had learned how to pilot any aircraft.

“I’ll be your copilot!”

“I see... You?”

The offer came from Rebecca, Blitzdonner’s former Hunter Unit A.I.

“The Crimson Hawk duo will escort you. So you can’t complain!”

“Yes, that does improve our chances of survival by at least one digit.” Lud responded with a wry smile.

“Shall we paint it red to suit the occasion? It’ll take some time, but I can do it.”

The Triebflügel was a prototype. It had a little paint, but it was mostly just bare metal.

“It’s not a bad idea, but we don’t have time. Langart, get in, would ya?!”

Lud and Sven departed for Penmunde, where Meitzer was held captive.

Until about ten years ago, Penmunde was a small rural village. It had a tiny fishing port and one old castle that was constructed a few hundred years in the past. It consisted of little else and was a village with no unusual characteristics. However, in the recent Great War, the Wiltian navy developed a supply base in Penmunde. The military repaired the crumbling castle and beefed up the port.

At first, the people were overjoyed. Business related to the military flowed in, resulting in economic growth. Before long, however, there was nothing to laugh about. The military port grew daily, and soon the fishermen were forced out and lost their fishing rights. Toward the end of the war, the location became a weapons test site, and the villagers were evacuated to prevent information leaks.

Penmunde, the village, was now gone. In its place was an experimental facility bearing its name. Inside the control room of the Penmunde Test Site, a man

was speaking.

“Are preparations for the launch of *Verne 1* proceeding smoothly?”

As chief of its headquarters, Hitzinger was the effective leader of the Security Department. He was asking Helmut, the assistant chief, for a status update on *Verne 1*.

“Yes, Deputy. We have already completed 90 percent.”

“Heh heh... Deputy? That doesn’t sound bad.”

Deputy... He was filling in for the deceased Genitz, so the title implied he was fulfilling that man’s ideals.

“Then you too are a deputy. You are Professor Auguste’s deputy.”

“That man is from an older time.”

Auguste was *Verne 1*’s head developer and should have been present. In fact he felt so guilty about the research he had performed, he was unable to issue the correct instructions for the launch preparations.

“The era of those old farts is ending. I’m sure that’s what Genitz would have said. Am I right, Helmut?”

“Indeed you are, sir.”

“The times are changing. We will have to leave behind those who cannot keep up. That is the law of nature.”

Hitzinger spoke proudly, as if he had just thought of that line, even though others had uttered it hundreds of times.

“Once the world learns of *Verne 1*’s existence, it will tremble at Wiltia’s might. Then they will realize who is their master!”

If Wiltia possessed a weapon capable of bringing down the hammer of God, even from far away, even across seas and mountains, all the nations would realize the futility of fighting, hang their heads and render homage. He truly believed that.

“The times are changing. A new era is coming and it is glorious. We must not stumble as we make the last move.”

“Yes, sir!”

“All personnel, remain wary! Those fools in Berun will be onto us soon enough!” He began issuing commands to his subordinates packed into the control room. “Have the observation towers report!”

“Yes, sir! Right away!”

A subordinate received reports via transmitter from the observation towers at the four corners of the test site.

“This is east tower... We are clear for launch!”

“Hmm...”

“This is west tower... Clear for launch!”

“Good.”

“This is north tower... Clear for launch!”

“Ah, yes...”

Reports came in from each location as if performing a meaningless ceremony.

“This is south tower...”

As the report from the last tower came in and they were almost cleared for launch, trouble arose.

“This is south tower! W-What the heck is that thing?!”

The soldier in the south tower raised his voice in bewilderment.

“What’s wrong?! What happened?!”

“Is... is that... an airplane?! What is that?!”

“What’s going on?! Report in detail!”

“G-Gaaaaah!!”

Communications with south tower broke off, and Hitzinger got no reply. But there had been what sounded like a collision before the connection was lost.

“What happened? Has the regular military launched an air raid? No, that can’t be...”

This may be Wiltian territory, but if they bombed without sufficient reason, there would be an outcry. It was only six months since the rebellion in the capital, so it would be like announcing to other nations that Wiltia's internal affairs were unstable.

"Elvin! What has he done?!"

Marshal Elvin had become a hero in the recent Great War. His craftiness caused enemy nations to tremble as if he were a god or devil.

"Send a combat unit to the south tower! We only have three—no, *two* days left! We can't fail now after having come so far!"

He promptly dispatched troops toward the south tower.

At the south tower...

"I *knew* we couldn't trust this thing!" Sven kicked open the door of the Triebflügel after the crash landing.

"Well, the *flight* went all right, but..." Grunting with effort, Lud followed her out of the craft.

"Hmm... Landings are a bit tricky, eh? As I suspected, this type of aircraft just isn't practical." As he voiced his thoughts, Daian pulled a memo pad from his pocket and began making notes on his failed prototype.

"This is no time for that!"

"Don't get so angry, Svelgen. We landed, didn't we?"

"We almost *died*!" Refusing to let him blow off their near-fatal crash, Sven yelled at Daian.

The Triebflügel's liftoff had gone well. The aircraft had performed better than expected, so well its passengers—Lud and the others—had been impressed. However, halfway through their flight, the all-important ramjets became unstable.

"High air pressurization is crucial to the ramjets, and there are three of them. It appears they still aren't perfectly synchronized. I'll work on that."

Daian spoke as if it were purely an intellectual exercise. Due to Blitzdonner's piloting and Rebecca's assistance, they had somehow managed to land without injuries.

"I had a hunch this would happen!"

Blitzdonner pulled himself from the aircraft. The Triebflügel had crashed into the south tower and partially destroyed it. Given the rough landing, it was almost a miracle that the passengers were unharmed.

"I hate wasting my luck on something like this..."

"Oh, it's all right! We planned to hit 'em hard anyway!"

Daian spoke jovially to Blitzdonner as the pilot offered his hand to Rebecca, the last to exit the aircraft.

"What do you mean, Director?"

"Langart, it's a little late to inform you of this, but I didn't try out this new invention, still under development, and come all this way with you out of the goodness of my heart!" In response to Lud's question, Daian spoke with an inscrutable look on his face. "From here on, we go our separate ways! It's probably for the best. Tackle your own objectives, and I'll do what I must."

At the precise moment Daian finished speaking, as if appearing from offstage on cue, soldiers flooded the area.

"I can, however, clear a path for you. Blitzdonner? Rebecca?"

Then, like a good actor, he gave his costars their scripts.

"Good luck!"

In response to his words, Blitzdonner and Rebecca started running.

"Let's go, Sharlahart!"

"Yes, Major!"

Sharlahart was the name Blitzdonner had given Rebecca when she was still a Hunter Unit. She did not let anyone else call her that. But, she was happy. He called her Sharlahart once again and she was able to fight at his side.

"Hraaah!!"

She leaped forward with enough force to rend the earth—and within a moment she had felled a few soldiers.

“What the... !!”

Taken by surprise, the soldiers hesitated. They were confused to see this young girl successfully take out their peers.

“Umph!!”

Blitzdonner was a veteran warrior, so he would not let this opportunity escape. He was human, but his limbs were mechanical. Even without weapons, he was strong enough to wipe out an entire platoon in an instant.

“Director Daian, will you be all right?” Lud asked as he kept an eye on the crimson duo’s fight.

Lud knew Daian was a genius, but the man’s combat ability was practically nonexistent.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get by. You should get going!” As he spoke, Daian handed him a bundle of papers. “This is...!”

It was a sketch of the Penmunde test site’s layout. There was a circle around one area.

“That seems to be where Meitzer is. Go quickly.”

It was impossible to understand what Daian was after. He didn’t act like an ally, but he had taken care of everything up to this moment.

“After all, if something happened to you, Sophia would be very sad.” Daian sighed as if this was regretful.

“Director, I’ll pay you back someday!”

“Yes, I’ll hold you to that.”

Lud and Sven bowed once to Daian and then raced off in the opposite direction.

“Now, if my expectations are correct... it’s about time for some action.”

Amidst the roar of battle, Daian flourished his cape.

Lud and Sven ran to rescue Meitzer. Penmunde Test Site was originally a feudal lord's castle. There had been renovations and additions, but although it looked reconstructed, inside it was concrete instead of stone. It was camouflaged to escape the notice of foreign spies.

"This way, Master!"

Meitzer was being held prisoner in a renovated storage area beneath the original castle.

"This is a test site, but it has a prisoner containment facility."

"I suspect it was originally a room for storing sensitive documents so they wouldn't be discovered."

"I see..."

In that case, getting Meitzer out might not be terribly difficult. Conventional containment facilities were designed to prevent escapes from within as well as attempts from the outside to break prisoners free. However, sensitive documents couldn't escape, so that changed matters. For example...

"Who goes there?!"

Three soldiers appeared up ahead.

".....!!"

Lud sprang forward, defeating the first soldier with a strong punch to his stomach. Before the second soldier could raise his gun, Lud struck his chin with the heel of his hand, and he fell unconscious.

"You guys stink."

From behind, Sven delivered a blow to the third soldier, knocking him out.

"Well, that makes sense."

Detention centers and prisons often contain wide, straight corridors so escapees can be spotted from a distance. This building was a castle, and used as a residence, not a fortress. The halls were narrow and winding, with lots of turns, thereby reducing visibility. Enemies could come close before the guards were able to respond.

“They’re young,” Lud thought as he looked at the fallen soldiers.

Lud also looked like a young man. However, the faces of these soldiers were even younger. They were probably in their teens, the age when they should have been attending high school.

“Oh, I see...” When he guessed the situation, Lud made a sour face.

They were like Lud and Hilde. At the time of the Great War, they both had been very young, without any military experience. However, they had lost their guardians in the war and didn’t have any place to go. The Security Department had taken them in as very young recruits.

“In war, they send the kids they steal off to fight in the war.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Good question. It makes sense to wonder.”

Lud’s reply to Sven was bitter. He had once faced a similar situation as a type-three soldier. That’s why he understood.

“They’re a generation that was stolen by war. This time, however, they’re being used unfairly to steal back what was taken from them.”

“That doesn’t make sense!”

“No, it doesn’t. But, that’s the way it is.”

Adults had started a war and children had been taken. They lost their families and the happiness that should have been theirs. The children grew up, the war ended and there was peace.

“Compared to war time, things don’t move as quickly during peace. Once you assume your station in life, you stay there.”

The poor stay poor for life. The resulting resentment forced them to make a choice.

“If war happens again, they could do the stealing this time.”

It was an awful way to think.

“It’s even worse than the relationship between Genitz and Hilde. They’re being fooled as well as used!”

Lud raised his voice in indignation. He suspected that he had actually been happier than they were. After the war ended, they had nothing, so they hoped for more war. Lud had met many good people and found a new life.

“Urgh!”

The difference between them was slight. This awareness caused him great pain.

“Sven, I have a favor to ask. Please try not to hurt them.”

Lud’s voice was strained as he asked.

Try not to hurt them... Not killing their opponents was something he no longer needed to ask.

It was an unrealistic request on the battlefield. However, Sven accepted it.

“Understood, Master. I mean... of course I won’t!”

“You won’t?”

“We’re just a rural baker and his employee! We’re not vicious soldiers! Right?”

Sven would have grumbled before, but now she felt differently. If the person she had decided to walk beside asked something of her, she would gladly do it. That wasn’t all. There was a time when she would not have shown mercy to anyone who harmed Lud, even a child, but she no longer had the desire to kill such people, even complete strangers.

“All right, let’s go. Victory goes to the first to strike! Soldiers prize haste!”

Now that she felt this way, she was happy.

Blitzdonner and Rebecca had held the soldiers back so Lud and Sven could get away.

“Oh my!”

Blitzdonner’s four limbs were made of steel. His fists were harder than hammers and his arms were more bulletproof than shields. Nonetheless, the number of opponents had them at a slight disadvantage.

“Major, reinforcements are coming from beyond—about ten soldiers.”

“That’s still no problem!”

“Fifteen will come in two minutes. With rifles.”

“That isn’t good...”

Listening to Rebecca’s warning, communicated via sonic sensors, even the Crimson Hawk began to lose his smile.

“Major, I have a suggestion. We shouldn’t hold back.”

Blitzdonner had given Rebecca an order as the battle began. “Don’t kill them,” he had instructed her. “They’re not even real soldiers. They barely have any combat experience. They have almost no discipline, so if we use persuasive methods against them, some will flee.”

Persuasive methods meant savage killing. It meant methods such as ripping off limbs, jabbing out eyes and tearing open guts.

“They don’t even know what they’re doing. That’s why they’re willing to fight us. So let’s teach them a lesson in how fearsome their opponents are.”

It was like crowd psychology. There is an illusion that if more people attack, the pain and death will be divided among that number of people. This wasn’t like that. A bullet means death on a ratio of one to one. Even if your army wins the battle, your own death cannot be undone. Younger soldiers have little understanding of this truth.

“Give the order and I won’t hesitate to—”

Rebecca was capable of such killing. She looked like a fragile young girl, but she had the strength to rend iron. It would be easy for her to break a human being apart.

“No.” Blitzdonner refused her offer.

“But, Major! This is war!”

“No, we’re at peace.” Blitzdonner contradicted her. “We have to keep the peace. We can’t let fools do anything crazy.”

“But this enemy doesn’t think like that!”

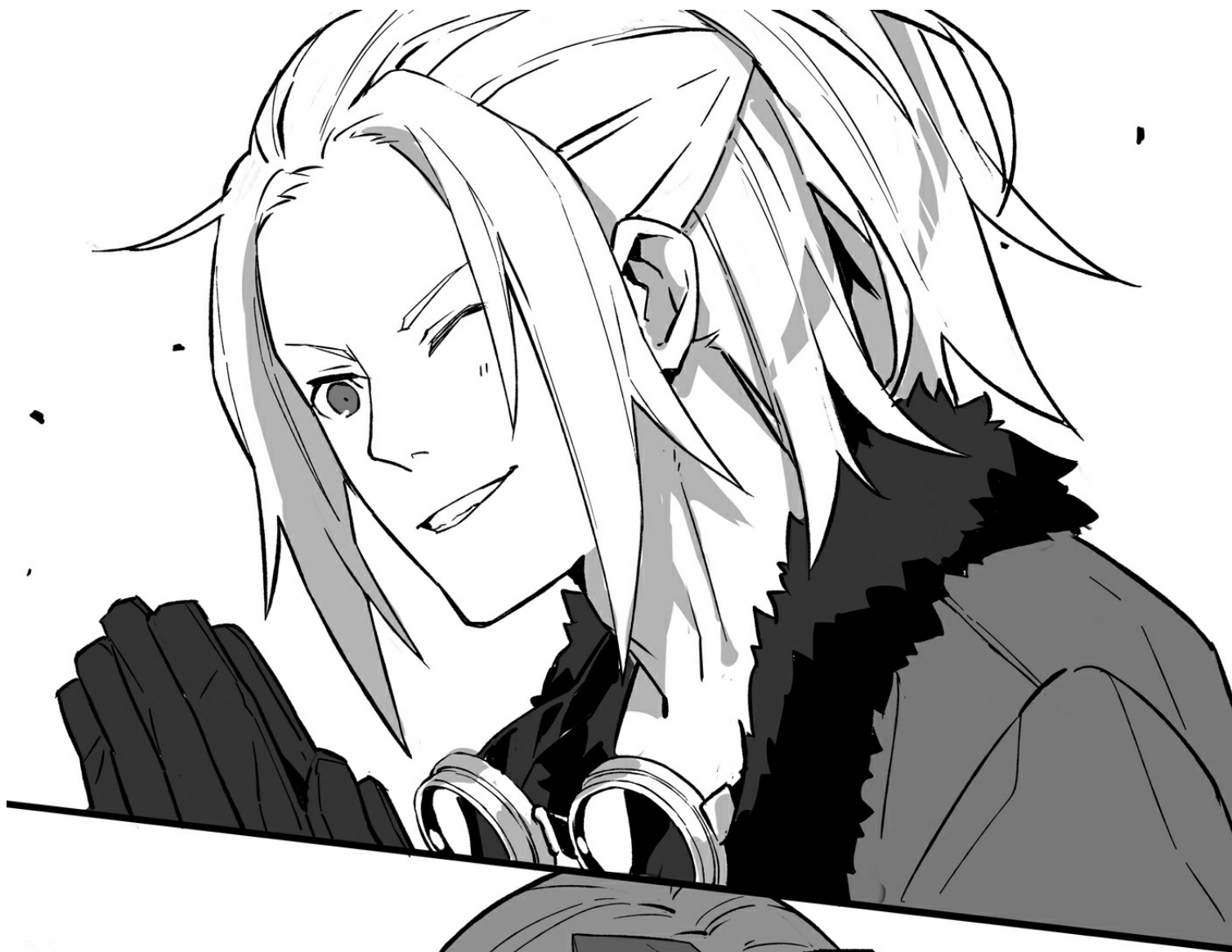
“Then we don’t have to play by their rules, do we?”

Those who want to start wars enjoy fighting those wars more than anything else. Blitzdonner and Rebecca had to make them realize that a war is what they were fighting. Blitzdonner hated that. Shielding these inexperienced young soldiers only had meaning if he treated them as minor criminals. That’s what he believed anyway.

“Stay with me here, partner!”

“Urgh... That’s cowardly!”

Rebecca could not understand Blitzdonner’s scruples. She couldn’t understand them, but if that was what the man she loved wanted, behaving accordingly would make her happy.



“This will be a pretty difficult fight. Is that all right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’ll handle it somehow.”

Rebecca was frustrated by his restrictions, but she was elated to fight beside Blitzdonner after so long.

“Where’s the professor?”

“What?”

The professor was Daian.

“He has already joined *her*. He will be able to achieve his goal on his own.”

“So that was his objective all along.”

Blitzdonner knew why Daian had come to the test site. The major had told Daian that he could not be his escort, but Daian’s mission seemed to have gone well.

“Then let’s hang in there a little longer!”

“Yes, Major!”

The two known as the Crimson Hawk ran toward the fresh batch of troops that had just appeared.

Meanwhile, beneath headquarters...

“Hmm...”

Meitzer was languishing in his underground cell when he heard noises. Sounds of battle: gunfire, shouts and explosions.

“The situation has changed?”

The sounds were so faint, normal human ears wouldn’t have heard. However, they were audible to *him*. At the same time, he heard something else. Faint footsteps...

“Who’s there?”

Had Hitzinger and his comrades come back? Or was it only *him*?

It was neither one. It was not a soldier at all.

Someone had entered the test facility during the battle all alone.

“What in the world...?” Seeing the woman who appeared, Meitzer covered his face. Of all the possibilities he could imagine, this added the very worst to the worst. “Why are *you* here?”

She responded to Meitzer’s question with a perky smile. “It looked like a fun party, so I decided to crash it.”

Before him stood the woman who had secretly controlled the world for over one hundred years. Even now, she was controlling August and trying to start the next Great War. It was the Saint.

Chapter 4: The Doll with Red Hair

“What a state you’re in, Devil! The humans you wanted to protect have bound and imprisoned you, but I have to say, you look most adorable like this!”

The Saint was brightly smiling and seemed to enjoy Meitzer’s discomfort from the bottom of her heart.

“Oh, really? I’m glad to hear you say that. We’ve known each other a long time, but you’ve always viewed me so harshly.”

“Of course! I haven’t forgotten for one day that you sealed me behind a Door one thousand years ago.”

There was an old legend in Europea about the Saint and the Devil. A great empire had ruled the world but suddenly fell to ruin. The Saint was said to have descended into a world ruled by chaos, where she led the people and restored civilization. The Devil had opposed the Saint and eventually she sealed him away.

Even now, the continent of Europea celebrated the Saint during the Holy Festival at the end of the year. Now the being called the Saint stood before him.

“I suppose there’s no use telling you that you should stop this mischief. If you tamper with human development and throw the world into havoc, it will only lead to irrevocable destruction.”

There was one fatal error in the legend. It wasn’t the Devil who had been sealed away. It was the Saint. Furthermore, the Devil was Meitzer.

“You’ve been doing this for a millennium. So I sealed you away, but...”

“Yes, you did. You got the better of me. May I ask you something? I thought I killed you that time. Why are you still alive?”

“You don’t need to ask what you already know.”

“I see... It was *that person’s* will.”

Meitzer did not reply. His silence answered more clearly than any words

would have.

“Ah... it appears *that person* is still watching me. How wonderful!” The Saint’s face was ecstatic, her eyes glistening like a dreamy maiden’s.

“You shouldn’t expect too much. He’s growing exasperated with your methods.”

“Silence!” Her smile disappeared.

At that moment, Meitzer was sliced in two.

“Ungh!!”

Wielding some kind of power which left not a scratch on the bars of his cell, she severed his body within.

“Hmf! What do you know about me and *that person*? You are a fake... Just looking at you makes me angry!”

“You’re as merciless as usual.”

Even with his body cut in half, Meitzer was still alive.

“Hyah!!” The Saint had already factored that into her course of action. She released a second blow and then a third.

“Unnngh?!”

She cut off Meitzer’s arms and legs, literally dismembering him, so Meitzer had to crawl like a caterpillar. Watching him, the Saint laughed loudly.

“I know that you’re invulnerable, but without your limbs, you won’t move for a while. And by the time you do, I will have completed my work.”

“Don’t... do... this...”

“Shut up.” The Saint moved as if to release a deathblow, but then she stopped. “I’ll spare you because of your face. Aside from your face and voice, I truly detest you.” The Saint spoke with venom, then turned and left.

“If she’s here... the situation is bad. Oh, I understand...” Meitzer’s thoughts spun as he writhed in the dark. “If that’s how things stand, this is very dangerous. I hope someone can stop her in time.”

The Saint had come alone. That was not unusual. At crucial moments, she always acted alone. She was inherently unable to trust anyone. More accurately, she couldn't trust any *humans*. She hated the human race.

We can take advantage of that...

Sven's face appeared in the back of his mind. She was his daughter—or rather, the daughter of his *true* self. Sven wasn't human, but she had fallen in love with a human, so only she had the power to defy the Saint. However...

"Sven must not meet her." Meitzer declared this to himself. He did not believe in God. He believed in God's existence. But he did not *trust* God. Nonetheless, today he was grateful for the vicissitudes of fate.

He was at the Penmunde Test Site, far from Berun, and even further from Organbaelz. It was impossible for Sven to come across the Saint. He was very relieved about that. If the two met, the result would be astounding.

Lud and Sven raced through the castle looking for Meitzer. The walls changed from concrete to stone. They were deep inside the castle, now used as a headquarters.

"We're almost there, Master."

There was little resistance from enemy soldiers now. They seemed to have disappeared. Most had headed out to confront Blitzdonner and Rebecca. They weren't skilled soldiers and in the confusion, they all rushed off.

"It looks like things are looking up," Lud said.

As long as they rescued Meitzer, the rest would proceed smoothly. They could leave the rest to Sophia and the others in the Wiltian special combat unit soon to arrive. Lud sensed the situation had taken a favorable turn. However, he should have known better than anyone that the soldier who voiced relief on the battlefield was the first to die.

"Hm?"

"Huh?"

She suddenly appeared in front of them. As Lud and Sven were rounding a

corner, they ran into the Saint. Just one moment earlier, she was underground, slicing Meitzer into pieces. Encountering her was an accident. However, it was very *unfortunate*.

“You...”

Sven stiffened when she saw the Saint. She didn’t know who this woman was. It was their first meeting. There was no way she could know of her existence, much less what she looked like.

“Yikes!”

Nonetheless, Sven understood with her intuition rather than reason. She did not know her, but Sven feared her.

“Oh my... You’re... Oh! I see...”

The Saint didn’t know Sven either. Until just now, she was barely aware of Sven’s existence. She had known there were such things as humanoid Hunter Units. However, she believed they were just toys created by the boy Daian using Europea’s technology. For that reason, she had neither cared nor had any reason to pay attention to them.

“What in the world...? Oh, I see.”

Yet the Saint understood. At a glance, she understood everything: who Sven was, how she was born, the intention behind her creation... everything. And...

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

The Saint broke into laughter. It was too ridiculous. Too irresponsible. She couldn’t help but laugh at how absurd reality was.

“Oh, right! That’s it? That man... This is how... Mm-hmm... Ah ha ha ha!! How utterly, utterly foolish!!”

“W-What the...?”

With no grasp of the situation, Lud was confused. Why was a girl like this in a military facility? She didn’t appear to be a servant. Was she a commanding officer’s mistress? No, that wasn’t it. But something wasn’t right.

“I see... You must be the Shepherd!” The Saint turned her head and gave Lud

a very creepy smile.

“?!” He couldn’t make a sound.

Ever since his early teens, Lud had lived in many places worthy of the name Hell. He had lived in a world ravaged by blood, guts, vomit and excrement. He didn’t think much could make him recoil. That was wrong. Very wrong.

What the...?

The Saint before him was different from those horrors. She was ghastly on a much larger scale. When she turned her eyes on him, darkness, the deepest, blackest darkness imprisoned him. This darkness wasn’t just bottomless. It was all-enveloping.

“Aha... So *that’s* how it is? Interesting!! A fake... In that case, I will teach you what the real thing is, you imitation!!”

As she spoke, she reached out her hand toward him. Lud stiffened.

“Master!!” Sven did not know what the Saint was doing. She only knew that she needed to protect Lud. “Don’t touch him!!” Sven tried to punch the Saint, but the moment she drew back her fist, light erupted like an explosion.

“Aaagh?!”

As the light swallowed Sven, some kind of power was activated around her. That power destroyed the stone floor, walls, ceiling and pillars. Everything around her collapsed.

“Master! Master!!!”

Assailed by a vision of the whole world crumbling, Sven reached for Lud. But, she could not touch him. The Saint placed her hand on Lud’s forehead and she was doing something to him. Lud didn’t move. Or rather, he *couldn’t* move. He had frozen like a statue.

“Master!” Sven shouted again, but Lud didn’t answer.

The Saint’s voice reached her ears with an odd clarity, despite the falling castle.

“Fake doll... I will teach you despair. True despair!”

At that moment, outside the south tower...

“What the?!!” Blitzdonner shouted in surprise at the sudden flash, explosion, and then the deafening crash of the collapsing castle.

“Major!”

At that unguarded moment, a bullet—perhaps random fire—struck him in the chest.

“Gugh!!”

The shot was so poor he would normally have predicted the trajectory and moved aside in time. It was a perfectly lucky hit; proof that even with eyes closed, any shooter has a chance of reaching his target.

“Tch! I flubbed up!”

Blitzdonner made light of it, but for a lucky hit, it was unfortunate for him. The bullet damaged the joint of his right arm, and he couldn’t move it.

“We got him! We got him!”

The young fighters from the Security Department were excited to have delivered a blow against their monster-like opponents.

How amusing...

Their joy over this small success was pitiful.

“How dare you shoot the major! How dare you!!” The red girl who fought alongside him had no pity. “Major! Forgive me for disobeying orders!” Rebecca’s eyes flashed red, the signal that she had released all functions and was shifting into full-power battle mode.

“Stop, Sharlahart! Don’t kill them!”

“I must teach these rookies a lesson!!”

Blitzdonner’s commands no longer reached Rebecca. Her priority was to execute the fools in front of her for committing the crime of threatening her beloved master’s life.

“Your safety, Major... I must return you unharmed!”

“Sharlahart...?”

Rebecca had promised herself something before beginning this raid. Finally, after disappearing for more than ten years, Blitzdonner had returned to his family. She would take him back to his son Jacob and wife Charlotte. To that end, she would use all her power.

“I’ll kill every last one of them!!” But before Rebecca could slaughter the enemy combatants, something happened.

“What the?!”

One young opponent’s face exploded with a *blam!*

“No way...”

It was not Rebecca’s doing. She was shocked at what she saw. But that wasn’t all. Bullets were fired from their flanks. Unlike the shots from the Security Department’s recruits, these were accurate. These bullets were shot with considerable training, polished skills and experience in actual combat.

“What? Where’d that come from?!”

“Hide! Find cover quickly!”

“No, fall back! Retreat, retreat!”

Under attack from unknown assailants, the soldiers were confused and frightened. Yet even more merciless attacks pursued them. A sound rang out like the lighting of a candle—*pshoonk!* Blitzdonner knew what it was.

“Major, get down!”

Rebecca also heard it. In fact, she had recognized the sound before Blitzdonner. It was a Panzerfaust anti-tank rocket launcher.

“Are they crazy?!”

The shell struck, followed by an explosion. The enemy soldiers were blown into scattered bits, as if a mischievous child had tossed a rock at a bunch of dolls. Body parts rained down with tiny thuds.

“Stop! That’s too much!!”

Blitzdonner shouted, but the force behind the surprise attack did not stop. A

second shot, a third shot... and each time an explosion occurred.

“Stop!!”

The explosions drowned out his shouts. It only took a few minutes. Within ten minutes, most of the Security Department’s soldiers were eliminated.

“Are you all right?”

Fully equipped soldiers appeared from the bushes. They had removed their insignia, but one soldier’s face was recognizable.

“You... Toolman?”

It was the special combat unit of the regular Wiltian army.

“I’m honored you recognize me. Um, may I call you by your name?”

Blitzdonner was officially missing, even as he undertook secret missions.

“Do as you like. There’s no one left alive here who might cause trouble if they heard.” Blitzdonner answered sarcastically.

“What’s going on? Why are you here?”

The unit led by Captain Toolman wasn’t supposed to arrive until early the next morning.

“Yes, I suppose Major Sophia is leaving the royal capital about now.”

“Did you... trick *all* of us?!”

He guessed everything from Toolman’s nonchalant expression as the man answered.

“It couldn’t be helped. The Security Department... Or rather, *rebellious elements* have infiltrated everywhere. They’re even within the royal palace and private companies, and inside the military. This was necessary to avoid any leaks in the plan.”

It was the most basic of strategies: To fool the enemy, start by fooling your allies. To successfully pull a surprise attack, spread misinformation so others let down their guard. You could even deceive friendly forces.

“Oh, I see. I suppose that’s why you included Rundstadt?”

“Affirmative.”

Toolman had never intended for Sophia to join the actual combat unit. For better or worse, she was incapable of deceit. She stood out, so he had fed her false information. Most likely, she was still in the royal capital attracting the attention of the Security Department’s spies. Then, he had gathered only those soldiers he could trust and hidden just outside Penmunde last night.

“You expected us to come and you used us as a decoy!”

“Affirmative. However, I didn’t *ask* this of you.”

“Why you...”

What Toolman said was correct. No one had ordered Blitzdonner or Lud to come. Toolman had manipulated information and swept them along toward the course of action that best suited him.

After all, he is the Bulletproof Baron...

Toolman had successfully carried out many difficult missions. Blitzdonner understood how Toolman had earned his nickname.

This man is a whole different creature from Rundstadt, Langart or me. He’s more like Genitz.

Like that resourceful general, Toolman would even use human psychology as a tool.

“Hm?”

Gunfire was audible although the battle was supposedly over. Shots were followed by more shots.

“Hey, what’re you doing?!” Blitzdonner shouted.

The special combat soldiers led by Toolman were still firing at the defeated fighters from the Security Department.

“The fight is over! Why kill soldiers no longer able to resist?!”

Toolman responded quietly to Blitzdonner’s shouts.

“Major, this is not war.”

“What?!”

“These are violent criminals defying the law. They are not prisoners covered by the conventions of war.”

“What are you talking about?!”

Massacring defenseless soldiers was strictly forbidden on the battlefield. They were to be captured as prisoners, disarmed, and treated according to military rules. Even if this standard wasn't always followed faithfully, it was the rule.

“They are traitors to the nation. We must thoroughly break their rebellious spirit. If they die as a result of that, it is not my concern.”

“Do you really think that's a sufficient excuse?!”

Blitzdonner—the man known as the Crimson Hawk—felt a chill at how lifeless and cold Toolman was. He was less human than a mannequin.

“I have received complete authority for this operation from the marshal, so I need explain no further.”

Toolman's message was, “If you've got a problem, take it up with Marshal Elvin.”

“Furthermore, by what chain of command have you come here, Major?”

“Urgh!”

The captain asked as if he already knew. Blitzdonner's party was not acting under any orders. They were acting on their own initiative.

“My apologies, but until the completion of this operation, I must take you into custody.”

As Toolman spoke, two soldiers stepped behind Blitzdonner without being signaled.

“Tch! I guess there's no choice, huh?”

Blitzdonner pretended to be at a loss and prepared to go along quietly, but then he released a kick at Toolman. With the strength of a mechanical soldier, he could kill a human being in one blow if he made contact. He held back, of course, but it would have immobilized his target.

“What?!”

However, he kicked only air.

“I thought you might try that.”

Faster than Blitzdonner could move, Toolman bent and grabbed the hilt of the sword at his side.

Uh-oh!

Toolman had dodged, leaving Blitzdonner wide open and unprotected. It happened so fast even Blitzdonner couldn't evade the attack.

“Major!”

However, someone sprang between them. It was Rebecca, the girl who considered herself his faithful servant. The high-pitched clank of metal on metal rang out.

“—!!”

Something flew through the air. It was an arm. Toolman had sliced off the arm that Rebecca had extended to defend Blitzdonner.

Impossible!!

Rebecca let out a silent cry of surprise. She was a humanoid Hunter Unit, so she didn't feel a human's pain. On the contrary, she was shocked a human being was able to damage her body.

“That girl is also a mechanical soldier? No, that felt like...”

There was no blood or flesh on the katana Toolman had used to sever Rebecca's arm. Of course not. She was made of neither blood nor flesh.

“I see. She is the Sorcerer's invention.”

The corners of the Bulletproof Baron's mouth twitched.

How much does this guy know?!

Even the most skilled, well-trained soldier would be startled and confused to encounter someone who wasn't human. Toolman, however, seemed unsurprised. He had already known there were humanoid Hunter Units.

“You resisted. Both of you. That’s unfortunate. I will dismember you and then... Well, I’ll decide that later.”

His blade rattled. Blitzdonner and Rebecca possessed superhuman prowess, but they shuddered before this blade forged by people of the East and able to slice through iron.

“Oh, you guys look like you’re having fun!” An unexpectedly cheerful voice cut in.

“Ugh...” Seeing the owner of the voice, Blitzdonner released a moan of despair. “What are you doing here?!”

“What a thing to say! That’s what *I’d* like to ask!”

It was the Saint. Blitzdonner had encountered her a few days ago in Haradin, but now here she was in Penmunde.

“Argh! What a day!” He couldn’t help but feel cursed by fate.

“Oh... Why are you here?” Toolman did not sound alarmed at the sight of the Saint.

Of course not. She looked like a young woman, but more beautiful than any other. But this woman had once appeared before Blitzdonner and cut off his arms and legs.

“Captain Toolman! Be careful! She isn’t an opponent you can beat!” Blitzdonner shouted a warning.

A warning to be careful because this woman was not what she seemed. A warning that, although Toolman had no way of knowing, she was more insane than he could imagine. However...

“Why in the world are you here?” Toolman spoke without alarm and returned the sword in his hand to its scabbard at his side. “I thought you were leaving everything to me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry but circumstances have changed. Am I troubling you?”

“Not at all.”

The two exchanged words casually.

“What is...” Blitzdonner stared in confusion.

“Hm?” The Saint looked as though they were having a friendly chat at a party.

“Oh dear, oh dear... Of course. You didn’t know.” The Saint spoke as if introducing an acquaintance to another friend. “Toolman is my devotee.”

“.....!” Blitzdonner was a veteran soldier who had survived many scenes of carnage, but he was now speechless.

The Saint had awakened 150 years ago. Since then, she had quietly controlled the world from behind the scenes. Some individuals discovered her existence. They were startled, scared and some were even awestruck and eventually developed faith in her.

The Saint made full use of that. She commanded her faithful to collect children. Many, many... countless children. Some parents willingly sold their children, and some even *paid her* money to take their children. She gathered these castoffs and put them through harsh training. The training was physical and mental, but she also gave the children *enlightenment*. By the time they were ten years old, they would gladly cut off their own heads for the Saint. Furthermore...

“I’ve sent them all over the world, placed them in businesses and the underworld, regardless of nation or ethnicity. They’re all excellent specimens, and they always find success and burrow into the center of their organizations.” The Saint spoke as if showing off a prized collection. “Don’t misunderstand. They commit themselves to their employers and work hard for them. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t get very far.”

However, every last one of these men and women would always put the Saint above all else.

“They diligently carry out their duties, earn the recognition of Captain Toolman and other superiors, and the confidence of their subordinates. Some get married and have beloved families.”

They blend into society and carry out their normal lives. No one noticed them. They appeared to be sensible and conscientious citizens.

“But when I give an order, they’ll obey instantly. Right, Toolman?”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Toolman responded like a machine.

“That man is your subordinate, isn’t he?”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“Kill him.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

Toolman drew the katana at his side and cut off the head of one of the soldiers standing behind Blitzdonner. The movement was so quick and unhesitating that it didn’t seem real.

“.....” Blitzdonner was stunned. Toolman had acted like a madman, yet none of the other soldiers were surprised. “No way... All of them? Are all the soldiers in this special combat unit your followers?”

“Yes, indeed.” The Saint praised him happily as if he had guessed the correct brand of black tea.

“What are you trying to accomplish?” Blitzdonner was stupefied as he asked.

These two behaved so irrationally that he couldn’t imagine what they might do next.

“As for the missile launch, there’s no need for any tests. We made it, so let’s launch it and drop it now!♪” The Saint’s laugh was charming and cruel.

“Where... Berun? No! Surely not!”

“August. Isn’t that nice? You’re safe.”

She was going to drop a new weapon of mass destruction developed by Wiltia on the capital of her own nation. It was an attack with the potential to start another Great War.

“You can’t do that!!”

“It can’t be helped! Wiltia and the other nations are reluctant to fight! Even August is increasingly war weary.”

“Of course!”

The ten-year Great War had gone on too long. Every nation was exhausted,

with both the victorious and the defeated simply struggling to get through each day.

“I made a mistake. I should have stopped it sooner. At four years, they would have believed they could win next time.”

Over fifty million were dead or missing from the recent war. The Saint was talking about a mistake that resulted in that scale of suffering as if she had messed up a cooking recipe.

“So...” The Saint’s eyes flicked toward Blitzdonner. “What will you do?”

It was a kind of death sentence. He couldn’t win against the Saint no matter how he struggled or resisted. She was a conqueror capable of freezing even the will to fight.

Ugh. Oh no...

Blitzdonner felt like a helpless pig facing a wolf. No... it was even worse than that. He was like meat on the dinner table, completely powerless to prevent being eaten.

Is she truly this dominant?!

He had no desire to strike a blow. The thought even occurred to him that the correct course of action was to admit defeat and surrender his life.

This is the end?

Blitzdonner started to kneel when suddenly a voice yelled out.

“Nooooo!!!” It was Rebecca. Her voice, raised as loudly as she could, lifted her master’s wavering heart. “Major! Run! I’ll buy you time!” Rebecca turned and glared at the Saint with one lost arm.

“It’s no use, Sharlahart! You can’t beat her!”

“I’ll fight her anyway!” Rebecca was so determined to challenge the Saint that she refused Blitzdonner’s command to stand down. “You must live, if only for one minute—one *second*—longer!” She seized Blitzdonner by his neck and threw him with all her might.

“Uaaagh?!”

“Pardon my insubordination!!”

Without looking back, Rebecca launched herself at the Saint. With no concern for her own protection, she mobilized all her strength for one blow. Rebecca had released all her limitations. She could pierce iron and crush rock.

“You... You’re not like *her*. In that case, it doesn’t matter.”

The Saint made no attempt to dodge. She knew there was no need to dodge.

“Kneel.” The Saint uttered a single word. The moment the Saint spoke...

“—?!”

The red girl was slammed to the ground. No, she fell to the ground.

This is like that other time...

Rebecca had experienced this before. When she had tried to strike Meitzer, she had lost control of her own body and her legs gave out.

What is this? What in the world is this?!

It was an unknown, unpredictable power. If there was one thing for certain...

She can control my body better than I can!

It was impossible, but there was no other explanation.

“I have no use for you, so *stop* right where you are.” The Saint spoke without even looking down.

What is she... This is... Oh, I see!

Rebecca finally formulated a guess. Before she could say it...

“Where did that man go?”

“It appears he has fled.”

Blitzdonner was nowhere to be seen. After Rebecca had thrown him aside, he had raced away, as fast and far as he could.

“Oh dear. He did not let his companion’s last wish go to waste. He’s quite a man.”

The Saint was mildly impressed. Not many people would run when told to in

such circumstances. Most would hesitate in confusion and freeze, unable to do anything.

“Having tasted humiliation, he chose the path of survival. Indeed, he is an outstanding soldier.” This was a rare instance of her genuinely praising a human being. “Oh well. I’ll let him go. There’s something I must do now. Toolman, lead the way!”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

The Saint’s plan was entering the final stage, so she headed for the control room for launch of *Verne 1*. Attended by Toolman and the other soldiers, she was as lovely as a princess.

Only Rebecca remained behind. She was a red-haired doll lying on the ground with no strength in her limbs and no light in her eyes.

“Umph... Heave-ho!”

Sven emerged from beneath a pile of heavy rubble. The mysterious light had swallowed her and she was trapped by the collapsing castle.

“There... seems to be no damage to my body, but my clothes are in tatters!”

One year ago, when she had started working at Tockerbrot, she made her own waitress outfit from materials she found in the bakery’s storeroom. She had sworn to wear the outfit until the cloth wore thin while she helped the bakery prosper.

“Too bad... I’ll never be able to repair it!”

Throughout the scrapes and blows over the past year, she had patched the tears and sewed the frayed parts, but the fabric had finally reached its limit.

“Forget about that. What about Master?!”

Lud’s safety was more important right now. She looked around but could see neither Lud nor that odd woman.

“What was that?”

She wondered about the woman’s strange power, but also about the

sensation, the feeling she had the moment she faced her. That feeling was difficult to describe. However, she searched for an analogy.

It was like I was seeing another me!

She hadn't been startled as if seeing herself in a mirror. Instead, she had felt dread as if meeting an identical replica of herself.

"I have to hurry!"

Sven didn't know the woman's identity. She definitely wasn't friendly. If Lud had been taken captive, she must rescue him. Sven steeled her resolve and set off. Rescuing Meitzer was urgent, but Lud took priority.

As she ran, Sven failed to notice something. She automatically knew where to go and proceeded without thinking, even though she didn't know the identity of that woman—the Saint—or where she had gone.

As for Lud...

Chapter 5: True Despair

“What are you doing?”

Someone was trying to get his attention. Who was it? He remembered when he saw her face.

“Oh... uh... sorry.”

“You’re sorry? I was talking and you spaced out. Don’t you enjoy talking to me?” The young woman seemed both angry and sad.

“Of course I do! It’s just... I had the strangest dream.”

“Dream? I’m here with you and you were *sleeping*?”

“No, no!” Lud defended himself.

He didn’t usually space out like this. A visit from her was enough to make any day fun. He was glad—even joyous—that the day had become a happy one for him. But, he didn’t understand why he had such a strange hallucination.

“What was it about?”

“What?”

“Your dream. What was it like?”

“Uh...”

What kind of hallucination had made him ignore her?

“It was a confusing dream. I was somewhere else... not here... and I, um...”

“Yes?”

“I was a baker.”

“What?!”

She made an astonished face, followed by a smile.

“Did you ever want to become a baker?”

"No, never." Lud answered immediately.

"I've never even considered it. Also, um, you and I were married."

"Huh?!"

He said it casually, but her face tensed and she blushed.

"W-What the heck?"

"You were the waitress and I baked bread. I don't know why, but I didn't like to be in front of people... so you... Hm?"

Her face was as red as a ripe apple.

"Does that... mean what I think it does?"

"What?"

"I'm asking if... you know...you feel that way."

"What way?"

"Argh!"

She hauled off and kicked him in the shin.

"What?! What did I say?!"

"Just shut up!"

It didn't hurt much, but if he had said something unpleasant, he wanted to apologize. However, she wouldn't explain. She would not tell him what he had done that angered her so much.

"Seriously! You never know what the Shepherd will say!"

He thought she was furious, but now she was laughing merrily and looked like an angel.

"Hey, take me to the stand today! Then I'll forgive you." She requested atonement from him for angering her.

Perhaps it was his imagination that she was in a good mood. In any case, if she asked something, he had to obey.

"Okay, okay. I will."

So Lud escorted her. They had met just a few months ago. She had suddenly appeared outside the imperial capital in the town meant for waiting.

“This place is fun! It always surprises me!”

She was a resident of the imperial capital. The European imperial capital was known as Millennium—the City of a Thousand Years—and it was the world’s greatest city. At least, that’s what people said. Lud had never entered the imperial capital. He had only seen the walls surrounding it, which were always there, every day, towering overhead.

“The imperial capital must be fun, because it’s got everything.”

According to rumor, the city was like a paradise. Hunger was unknown, illness didn’t exist, and there was release from every type of suffering imaginable.

“Yes, there’s no need to work.”

“I envy that.”

Lud worked as a day laborer and barely scraped by on his wages, so that sounded like a dream. The imperial capital of Millennium supposedly possessed a power similar to magic. The people didn’t need to walk anywhere because they automatically received everything they could desire. They were permitted all manner of luxury and they basked in it.

“The residents don’t even know what it feels like to hunger for anything, because there is a system of peace and contentment above all else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you think humans fight?”

Lud didn’t have an answer to this unexpected philosophical question. Apparently, she didn’t expect an answer. She continued without a pause.

“Desire. Hungry people try to steal food from others. Poor people try to steal whatever they need from others. Deprivation causes the heart to desire. Hope causes conflict. For that reason, more food than could ever be consumed is always available. So no one feels desire.”

If you gave one hundred people enough food to feed one million, no one would ever go hungry. If everyone had plenty, conflicts would never arise.

“That’s incredible. That is absolute peace.”

“Hardly!” Lud was impressed, but she responded scornfully. “The people living in the imperial city don’t know hope. As soon as they wish for something, they have it. Can you really call that living?”

Her face showed fierce resentment, anger and—above all—hate. Lud didn’t know what she had seen beyond that wall. He could not imagine a world where every desire was satisfied.

“Sorry. I just don’t understand. I still feel envious.” Lud couldn’t lie, so he apologized and spoke the truth.

“Yes, and that’s all right.” Apparently, she liked that answer. “You don’t need to understand. It isn’t how human beings should live. Not knowing is human.”

Lud didn’t understand. But although he didn’t know what she meant, he knew her eyes showed affection for him.

“People can only live because they continue to *hope*.”



In the control room...

“Okay, all finished!♪”

The remaining soldiers for the Security Department were holed up in the control room desperately plotting resistance. However, it rapidly failed. For one thing, the soldiers’ skills were poor, so they couldn’t buy time. The corpses of fallen combatants littered the bloody floor. Among them was the body of Hitzinger, chief of Security Department headquarters.

“I don’t know if there’s a next life, but if there is, give that boy my greetings.”

Amidst the dead bodies, the Saint was pleased that everything was going smoothly and was in the best of moods.

“Now as for you guys...”

“Uhhh...”

She spared the lives of the control room staff. That wasn’t from any humane considerations or because they were noncombatants. They were spared because they were essential for the launch. Assistant Chief Helmut could only tremble at the hellish scene before him.

“Oh dear. Don’t be afraid. I won’t kill you.” The Saint spoke with no change in her voice, which made it all the more chilling. “A war will begin now, so I need as many scientists and engineers as possible. Come to August.”

She was proposing treason to this member of the Security Department, an ultranationalist supporting world unification under Wiltia.

“I’ll give you anything you want. Money, personnel, facilities, materials, status, honor... Whatever you want! Just name it and I’ll get it for you.”

He was startled by the conditions she offered. However, the more she promised him, the more he feared what would happen if he refused. She would certainly retaliate with, “Oh. In that case, die!”

Trembling and bowing deeply, Helmut begged for his life. “Y-Yes, as you wish!!” In fear of his impending death, he lost any pride, faith, patriotism or strength.

“Oh, how obedient you are! I like obedient people. I’m counting on you, okay?”

“Yes, Ma’am!!” Helmut’s spirit was broken. He would swear fealty to the Saint so passionately he would willingly lick the bottom of her shoes.

“When everything goes according to plan, I feel happy. Now for the launch!”

When the Saint spoke, gunshots sounded in the distance.

“What was that?” Toolman requested reports from his subordinates.

“Enemy approaching! One enemy!”

“One?” Toolman frowned at the report. Not because he thought there might be more soldiers resisting. He didn’t think there was anyone left from the Security Department with the combat ability to single-handedly take on his subordinates.

“Who is it?” He thought perhaps Blitzdonner had returned, but with only one arm, he could not stand against the Saint. Toolman was sure that Blitzdonner wouldn’t dare attack so recklessly.

“Oh, that girl has come.” The Saint had a good idea of who it might be. A moment later, she appeared in the doorway.

“Where’s Master?!” It was Svelgen Avei, the popular waitress of Tockerbrot.

“I’m glad you came! After all, I couldn’t have you dying so quickly.” The Saint spoke without losing her smile.

“Where is Master?! If you give him back right away, fine! But if you don’t…”

“What would you do?”

“I’ll make you suffer and then I’ll kill you.”

“What if I give him back?”

“I’ll kill you *without* making you suffer.”

“Oh dear…”

Sven was overflowing with an anger that almost made her hair stand on end. The Saint made a face of exaggerated concern.

“Stay back, Saint. I’ll handle this.” Toolman took a step forward. His hand was already on the hilt of his *katana*. “I don’t know who you are, but if you get in my way, I can’t guarantee your life.”

Out of good will, Sven tried to warn the man threatening her. He must be considerably skilled. The sword at his side must also be of good quality. However, Sven didn’t intend to let *anyone* defeat her at this moment. She felt ferocious enough to bite and kill like a hungry wolf.

“Ha ha... Oh, right. I’ll do the same to you as I did to the other doll.”

“What are you talking about? Hurry up and decide. Do you want me to kill you or not?!” Sven took a step forward. In one more step, she would be within firing range. She could then drive her foot into the girl’s throat.

“Oh dear. How frightening! You’re scaring me, so I’ll have my shepherd protect me.”

“What are you talking—” Before she could finish her question, Sven noticed someone standing behind her. Since she hadn’t noticed him earlier, he must be a very skilled soldier.

“Tch!”

Instantly, without even turning, she leapt away. The man’s fist struck the space where Sven had just been standing.

“I held back, but you’re good,” the man muttered.

“Huh?” Sven stopped in shock when she recognized the man. This was impossible. Why was he acting this way?

“You must not be human. I don’t want to hurt someone so pretty, so why don’t you just leave,” the man said.

He was telling Sven that if she left right now, he wouldn’t do anything else. This was impossible. It couldn’t be happening. There was no way this man would say that. Not to *her*.

“Why... Master?”

The man standing before her was Lud Langart.

“Have we met somewhere before?”

“What are you talking about?”

Was this some kind of a joke that wasn't funny? The person she knew better than anyone else, the person more important than her own life, was acting as though they had never met.

“Master, it's me! It's Sven! Svelgen Avei!! I'm your... your...”

She wanted to shout she was his wife, but Lud's eyes only showed bewilderment. No, that was wrong. It was even *worse*. He looked exasperated, as though he was thinking, “What is this girl talking about?” Furthermore, his eyes showed a kind of compassion as if he pitied her.

“Doesn't this girl say the strangest things, Lud?” The Saint spoke to him as if she had known him for a very long time. “The poor girl! She thinks she's Sven! She thinks she's your lover! Isn't that pathetic?”

“What? Who would do that?”

Ignoring Sven, the Saint and Lud were talking about her. They were treating her like a *fake*.

“How can you say that? I... I'm Sven... Svelgen Avei. I'm your... Lud Langart's...”

“I'm sorry, but you're mistaken. You are *not* Sven.” Lud denied Sven's claim with a compassionate voice.

“This is Sven. *She's* my wife.”

“What...?”

Lud pointed at the Saint. The Saint was smiling. It was a happy smile. This was what she had meant about teaching Sven true despair.

“No... Why? This is wrong... I...”

Now her prediction had come true. For Sven, losing Lud would mean the greatest despair. And that just became a reality.

“No...”

The world went black and Sven collapsed on the spot. Her heart was

mechanical, but she loved a human and wanted to become human herself. Faced with losing Lud, her heart was broken.

“Take that, you *fake*.”

The last thing Sven heard was the Saint’s laughter.

Toolman was surprised that Sven had unexpectedly appeared and just as unexpectedly had collapsed.

“What in the world did you do?” He knew he was incapable of understanding the Saint, but he asked anyway.

“It’s no big deal. She’s just a mechanical doll. She couldn’t cope with information that surpassed her understanding.” The Saint’s answer was mysterious. “She possesses what you might call a pseudo heart. She harbors a monomaniacal obsession for her owner. So I changed its object.”

“Its object... Do you mean *him*?”

Toolman looked at Lud Langart, the large man in front of him. He must be suffering from some kind of brainwashing, but Lud’s eyes didn’t have that particular warped look Toolman expected. Lud’s emotions and mental faculties were functioning normally. He was actually staring at the unconscious silver-haired girl with pity.

“I overwrote his memories and replaced them with memories of me. He thinks I’m Sven.”

Human memory was said to result from electric signals coursing through the brain. Interfering with that process externally would not affect the human intellect. Subjecting someone to electric signals, however, could theoretically rewrite existing memories.

“How pitiful... and funny. The man she loves still loves her but he doesn’t recognize her. Ha ha ha... Her pseudo heart couldn’t tolerate that despair.”

The Saint looked down at Sven. Then she stomped on her head the way she might a dead animal.

“It was too mischievous of that boy to create something like her.

Nonetheless..." The Saint had a thought. There was Sven, Meitzer, herself and *him*...

"Oh, I see... I wasn't worth looking at." For the first time, deep sadness colored the Saint's features.

"Um, Saint? What should we do with her?" Without noticing the change in her expression, Toolman asked for orders.

"Good question. Perhaps I should crush her, and send the pieces to Meitzer."

That would be the supreme act of spite against the man still bound in the underground cell. As she was thinking, a staff member in the control room timidly raised his hand.

"Um, excuse me, but... if you don't need her, can I have her?"

"What?"

The man spoke to her without permission and the Saint openly glared with displeasure.

"It'd be a waste, wouldn't it? She's so pretty. So... if you don't need her, um, heh heh heh..."

The man laughed obsequiously, licking his lips with a vulgar look on his face. He was so disgusting it gave the Saint the creeps.

"Should I kill him?" Toolman asked when he sensed the Saint's displeasure.

"Yes, please." At that moment, however, the Saint changed her mind. "No, it's all right. I'll allow it. Do as you like with her."

The man disgusted her, but the Saint granted permission. She did not need to think about what this man would do to Sven's body. The thought of him using her and defiling her as an object of his desire was immensely satisfying to the Saint.

"Do as you please to your heart's content. Yes, and when you're finished with her, throw her in with the man in the underground cell. Understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" The man agreed with a slobber like a wild dog, an expression of sinister joy on his face. "Now if you'll pardon me..."

The man lifted Sven's body and went off with it. Even that sight gave the Saint pleasure.

Meanwhile, Blitzdonner...

"Argh!"

He had fled into the forest and taken a long detour, eventually arriving at the coastline. This was Penmunde, originally a fishing port, where he thought he might find a boat, but there was only a rundown pier.

"I'm ashamed of what I did to Sharlahart..."

He remembered Rebecca's face as she had hurled him away. Her expression was pathetic. It was the face of a soldier who accepted death but was holding on in order to save someone else's life. Even if he accepted the humiliation of running away and the bitterness over abandoning his companion, Blitzdonner believed he had to survive.

"I wanted to find a way to get Langart and Svelgen out of there."

But the plan had completely fallen through. This was no longer about helping Sven become human. The most he could do was get the two of them safely back to Organbaelz. Now he couldn't even do that. He bitterly cursed his useless arm.

"What a disaster!"

He was about to say, "I guess this is the end," but he brushed that aside. If he gave up now, then why had he sacrificed Rebecca? However...

"Think, Blitzdonner! You're the almighty Crimson Hawk! There must be a way! Something... anything..."

He couldn't think of a solution. Precisely because he was an excellent soldier, his thoughts were realistic and only considered what was possible. His left arm still worked. As he began to feel that it was getting heavy, he heard something.

"Hm?"

He had heard that sound before. It was a sound he recognized.

"Hey, wait. Why *here*?"

He stared at the surface of the sea and his body tensed.

Sven didn't have the same type of dreams that human beings have. Her dreams didn't arise from hopes and aspirations. Her dreams consisted of what the eyes saw during sleep.

Yeah...

Nonetheless, she was inside a dream. The feeling was familiar to her. She had experienced it several times.

"Oh dear, oh dear... This is quite a mess!"

She heard it again. A voice she didn't know. However, she had finally grasped who it belonged to.

You're Douglas Meitzer, aren't you?

She was certain the owner of the voice was the mysterious man who called her his daughter.

"No, I'm not Meitzer."

Huh?!

Sven was perplexed that her guess was totally wrong.

"But the smooth, insincere way you speak, as though you don't think of people as people, is like Meitzer."

Above all, he had said, "Long time, no see!"

"Oh, right. He did say that, didn't he?"

The reply was offhand, exactly like Meitzer.

Then who are you?!

"I am God."

What?

The voice claimed to be God. Meitzer had claimed to be the Devil. Sven's head was beginning to hurt.

“Losing your patience? Well, it can’t be helped. I was called God by the people who created me.”

The people who created you? They made God? Who has the ability to make God?

“It’s always *humans* who make God. Human beings are imperfect, so they seek what is perfect. However, nothing perfect exists in this world, so they *created* it, and that’s me.”

I don’t understand what you mean. But... if you’re God, then...

With as much feeling as she could muster, Sven screamed and begged.

Give Master back to me!

She had never thought Lud would look at her the way he just had. It was a face she knew well and an expression she knew well. Her master had looked at her as if she were a stranger, and that was enough to break her heart.

“She does the cruelest things. It’s too bad.”

The voice’s owner, who claimed to be God, knew about the Saint.

Who is she?

Sven wanted to understand the woman’s identity. This mysterious woman who had taken everything from her.

“She’s similar to the one you and I call Meitzer.”

Now I’m even more confused!

She could not imagine the connection between the mysterious middle-aged man and the owner of this voice claiming to be God.

“If you want to know, you should ask him—Meitzer. He’s the one originally responsible. Besides, he knows how to get the person you want back.”

Really?!

Sven didn’t care if she was talking to a real god or not. If there was any way to bring Lud back, she would rely on a false god.

“You say the strangest things. ‘Bring back,’ did you say? Heh heh...”

God laughed as if it were the funniest thing in the world. It was a loving laugh toward someone ignorant, but innocent and pure.

“Take him back? Don’t be ridiculous. This whole world is yours. There is nothing you could want that you can’t have. If you think he has been taken, that’s an illusion. From the very start, you have possessed *everything*.”

You said something like that before. But what is ‘everything’?

“Everything is everything. There is no need to define it.”

Those were his final words before he disappeared. However, he was never visible. It would be more accurate to say she could no longer sense him. At that moment, Sven regained consciousness.

At the same time, Lud...

Chapter 6: The Counterattack Begins

A giant slum had been constructed around Millennium, the imperial capital of Europea, as if clinging to the massive wall that separated the city from the outside world. The slum covered over ten times the area of the imperial capital. In fact, the imperial capital was the center of the slum. It was created by people called Shepherds.

“The residents of the imperial capital can leave, but people outside can’t go into the city.” As the girl spoke, she filled her mouth with fruit purchased at the stall. “The city is under strict population control.”

“Yes. The resident number is ten million, no more and no less.”

This was common knowledge among Shepherds like him.

“However, people don’t always live and die according to plan. Sometimes the population unexpectedly decreases. That’s when they bring in replacements from outside.”

“I know.”

That too was common knowledge.

The reception area was next to the entrance to the imperial capital, the main gate that never opened. If someone registered with reception and their name was chosen, when an opening arose they could join the residents of the imperial city. The fortunate person would enter a paradise free of suffering and distress. However, that rarely happened.

Scarcely one person was chosen every ten years. People relying on this slight hope came to live in front of the gate. This practice continued for over one hundred years, and eventually a slum grew, populated by those awaiting their turn.

“I heard a rumor that God is in the imperial capital. Is it true?” Someone who had left the imperial capital decades ago had made that claim.

“Oh... God?” Hearing his words, the girl spoke bitterly. “The people inside the imperial capital fear mistakes and seek only what is correct—ultimate correctness without error—but they don’t consider what is truly correct.” Again, she stared at the city walls with intense hatred. “For those people, worrying over their choices became the greatest suffering. So they created something perfect that never makes mistakes.”

They created something that would provide the right answers, a being they could believe was always correct, even if it wasn’t.

“The residents gave the True System the name God.” She spat the words as if she felt filthy even saying them.

“Do you *hate* God?”

“Yes, I do. Although hate may not be quite the right word.” The girl appeared unable to compose her features or her feelings. In addition to hatred and revulsion, she showed an uncontrollable indignation toward the injustice.

“I suppose he isn’t evil. But, I wonder why it has to be *me*.” As she spoke, she finished eating the fruit and threw the rind into a waste bin.

“Why do I have to become God’s wife? The Saint? Give me a break!”

“*Glub-glub-glub...*”

When Sven woke up, she was in the water.

“*Glub-glurgle-glub?!*”

She woke up under water!

It was sea water. Under the ocean, with poor visibility and no way to breathe, a human would drown in a panic and sink to the sea floor, but Sven didn’t need to breathe.

“*Blosh-blubble-burble-spwosh?*” *What am I doing here?*

Controlling herself, she tried to discover how she got here.

Did I lose consciousness and they threw me in? How dare they?!

Sven was furious that someone had treated her like an object—like trash—and committed illegal dumping on top of that!

Now what should I do?

There was little light because she was deep beneath the surface. She considered sinking further to the seafloor and walking until she reached land, but she didn't know how far she was from the bottom. If she went too deep, she might become inoperable.

There's no choice but to swim to the surface.

It was difficult to rise in the pitch-black sea, but no sooner had she decided to try, she saw light in the water.

"Glosh?"

She was underwater. The only living creature that would emit light down here would be an anglerfish. There were, however, other possibilities that were not alive.

No way...

Something more massive than a whale with lights for navigation appeared in front of Sven. It was a submarine.

A few minutes later, the submarine rescued Sven. Wiltia had an excellent navy. Its navy had submersible technology that in some ways surpassed Hunter Units. Sven had never seen a submarine with functions for performing work while navigating underwater, so she was surprised.

"What is this thing?"

The "belly" in the center of the aft section opened, bringing in Sven along with a large amount of seawater, and then closed.

It ejected the water and replaced it with air. No other nation possessed a submarine with this type of navigational ballast mechanism, which brought in seawater for weight. At least, not that Sven knew of.

Does this vessel belong to some other nation?

A navy submarine had scooped her up, but Sven was bewildered as to why. Then the lights in the room came on, a hatch opened, and someone appeared.

It was...

“Are you all right?”

“Major Rundstadt?!”

It was Sophia von Rundstadt.

“I’m glad you’re alive. I heard what happened. It’s the worst.”

“Wait. Major?! Why are you here?!”

Someone else appeared.

“Hello, Svelgen. I’m glad to see you.”

It was Blitzdonner, who she thought was back fighting the Security Department after telling Sven and Lud to find Meitzer at the test site.

“Major Blitzdonner too?!”

Sven was at a complete loss when yet another person—a woman—appeared.

“Oh my! Is this Little Lud’s special someone?”

The woman was not Wiltian. Actually, she wasn’t even from the continent of Europea. She was from an Aesian continent.

“You know Master? Who are you?”

“My name is Suzuka Amaki. I’m a military attaché from Yamato. We can talk more later. I can’t stand seeing you soaking wet, and there’s a change of clothes ready, so come with me.”

The woman named Suzuka narrowed her almond-shaped eyes as she spoke with a very cheerful voice.

Yamato was an island nation on the far eastern edge of the continent of Aesia. After many years of not involving itself in international affairs, fifty years ago Yamato started interacting with other nations. Wiltia had been its enemy early in the Great War, but they later became allies, and it now had an embassy

in Berun. It was Sven's first time meeting someone from Yamato.

"Sit down. Shall I have tea brought in?"

"Yes please."

Submarines have limited space, with small rooms. This reception room was more cramped than the sales room at Tockerbrot. Nonetheless, it had a sofa and was decorated with fine furnishings.

"I can understand your confusion. The regular army knew about Toolman's treachery and the existence of that woman from August."

Sven changed into dry clothes and sipped tea as Sophia explained the situation. Elvin was the highest commanding officer in the regular army, and he had suspected that the mysterious woman called the Saint was involved in the matter. However, the full picture remained uncertain, so he devised a plan.

"Toolman excluded me from the special combat unit so it would consist of only himself and his men, so I was ordered to take a separate course of action."

The Saint's devotees had infiltrated many areas of Europe, in different countries and in multiple organizations. For that reason, Sophia had requested cooperation from Yamato, a country outside Europe.

"Wiltia provided this submarine to Yamato as part of technological exchange. We brought it here under the guise of a trial voyage with no official military records."

That explained why Suzuka, Yamato's military attaché, was on board. In fact, Sophia was accompanying Suzuka aboard Yamato's submarine.

"Marshal Elvin devised a plot to encourage Toolman's treachery so the army could capture all the Saint's supporters at once while also cracking down on the Security Department."

This was the true purpose of the rescue unit for Meitzer.

"Isn't the marshal a bit too proficient in subterfuge?"

Sven had a mechanical brain, but even to her, this plot sounded excessive.

"I don't think this has been going as planned so far either."

Sophia, who had received the order, recognized that the operation was against regulations, no matter how you looked at it. The mission was to suppress traitors infiltrating the regular army, so it could not involve soldiers from that force. There was no one more trustworthy than Sophia. However, using a soldier from another country in a highly risky operation wasn't something to be done lightly.

"Yamato is always looking for a way to put Wiltia in its debt. And Wiltia even gave us a souvenir."

With the exchange of this submarine, she had received permission to deploy Suzuka.

"So little Lud has been taken by the enemy?"

Sven had brought Suzuka up to speed. However, she had not disclosed the fact that she was a humanoid Hunter Unit.

"Um, why have you been calling him Little Lud? Do you know my master?"

"Yes, of course. He was my student."

"What?!"

Then Sven remembered. Lud had told her that a soldier from Yamato taught him martial arts as part of the military exchange between east and west. He told her this back when Sven was Avei.

"That takes me back. Little Lud was so cute. I wonder what he's like now."

"Um..."

If Sven remembered correctly, the last time Suzuka saw Lud was eight years ago. In her memory, Lud was the most adorable person in the world, but he was now a large, muscular man. According to usual standards, he wasn't cute.

Master did say he entered a fierce growth spurt in his late teens...

Suzuka's memory of Lud compared with the way he looked now were so different that it could be two different people.

"I'll explain it to her." Sophia spoke when she guessed what Sven was thinking. "In any case, the counterattack begins now. General Douglas holds the

key to returning Lud to normal.”

“Yes...”

If what the being who called himself God told her was true, then Meitzer—who was still captive—held the key to everything.

“Rescue General Douglas, return Lud to normal, prevent the launch of *Verne 1*, and defeat Toolman’s unit...”

“When you put it like that, we face a lot of difficult tasks.”

“Yeah...”

Sophia and Sven sighed in unison. Doing even one of these would be a huge job, but there were *four*.

“We have to do it!”

“Uh-huh!”

They both knew that it was too late to pull back now.

“Before that, I would like you to return my clothes.”

“Aren’t they unwearable?” Suzuka sounded surprised at Sven’s request.

Sven’s waitress uniform had already been through a lot and the fight today had nearly destroyed it. But even without the tears, the frilly outfit was not an advantage in battle.

“I need it,” Sven insisted.

Her waitress uniform, which she had created to live her life at Lud Langart’s side, was much more than just an outfit. In line with his wishes, she would not turn this fight into a war. As a soldier and as a military weapon, she did not want to fight. She wanted to remain Tockerbrot’s popular waitress to the very end.

“All right. I’ll have it dried right away.”

As if she sensed Sven’s determination, Suzuka reassured her with a grin. Just then...

“But first, may I?” Blitzdonner had been listening in silence, but now he raised

his hand to speak. “There’s something I want you to do to improve our chance of success, if only a little.”

Sven and her group set about launching their counterattack. However, they were few in number. They were only four: Sven, Blitzdonner, Sophia and Suzuka.

“Couldn’t you come up with a few more people?”

“This was the limit if we didn’t want them to notice us.”

There was no way they could reveal the soldiers from Yamato. They were only operating the submarine. Nonetheless, they were performing a crucial function in securing the escape route, so their involvement had to remain a secret.

“Well, there aren’t many of them either, so it’ll work out somehow.” Suzuka was laughing, which made Sven all the more uneasy.

If you didn’t include the technicians necessary for the launch of *Verne 1*, the number of Security Department soldiers in the test site was about fifty. The number of soldiers Toolman led to suppress them was a little over ten. He must have decided that number would be enough against the untrained Security Department soldiers.

“However, they’re all pretty tough.”

They were all followers of the Saint and would happily lose their lives for her. They were possibly even more dangerous than the special operations soldiers known as Werewolves who served with Lud under Genitz’s command.

“Now that I think about it, that man may have anticipated events and started putting together a unit sure to serve as his pawns.” Blitzdonner spoke quietly.

There was no way to know now.

“What I’m saying is...” Sven had come into direct conflict with them, so she was trying to convey the danger she suspected. She thought Suzuka’s easygoing manner communicated an unwariness because she didn’t understand.

“I said it’ll be all right, Missy. You guys should go on ahead.”

Suzuka was easygoing precisely *because* she understood. She frowned angrily

as she told them to get going. They were dividing their already small numbers in two for this counterattack.

“Meet that old guy Meitzer quickly and help out Little Lud.” Cackling, Suzuka put on a show of what might be called innocence and left for the control room.

“Leave it to me. I’m not without a plan.” Sophia followed her.

“We have no choice but to trust her.” Despite her misgivings, Sven also left with Blitzdonner.

The Saint was on standby in an office inside the castle. The owner of the room was already dead. She was killing time until the launch preparations were complete.

“Saint...” Toolman appeared.

“Ah, you came sooner than I expected.”

The Saint understood before she heard what happened. She looked down on human beings but she did not take them lightly. Some insects are poisonous and some use mimicry. Therefore, she remained wary.

“Was it Elvin? He appears to be a superb commanding officer. As for you, Toolman, weren’t you paying attention?”

It was very rare to encounter someone capable of acting based on impossible odds, but such people did exist. One existed before. There was a man from the Greyten Empire so heroic that a statue of him was erected, and Elvin was perhaps like him.

“How many? There can’t be that many of them, are there?”

The number of soldiers they could mobilize behind her back couldn’t amount to much. Ten people? Twelve at most?

“There are two.”

“Hm?” When informed of the number, the Saint was surprised.

Inside the castle, Sophia and Suzuka were battling the special combat unit.

“Oh dear. Whatever is the matter?” In the center of a large hall, Suzuka stood grinning.

A few soldiers had already fallen around her with their limbs bent in impossible positions.

“Why you...!”

The hardened soldiers of the special combat unit were unable to take action. They weren’t only fighting Suzuka.

“Urgh!”

“Stop! Don’t shoot!”

A single soldier stepped from behind, raising a gun. A bullet faster than sound pierced his hand before he could pull the trigger.

“Don’t move! Stay back!”

Under orders from Toolman, the deputy captain ground his teeth in frustration.

Argh... We’re trapped!

The strategy that Suzuka and Sophia had adopted was uncomplicated. Suzuka would close in alone and unarmed. When the soldiers responded, Sophia would pick them off from her hiding place. It was uncomplicated—*extremely* simple, in fact. However, pulling this off would require a sniper with extraordinary skill.

This is the Black Spear? I had no idea she was this good!

Sophia was highly gifted as a commanding officer, and she was an expert in military martial arts. That wasn’t her true forte, however. Her skill in marksmanship was more remarkable.

“What’s wrong? You wanna play hide-and-seek?” Grinning, Suzuka taunted them. Her expression communicated absolute certainty that she would not be shot.

Sophia was also known as the Black Spear. She was given that nickname after her astounding results as the first Hunter Unit sniper in military history to use a super long-range cannon originally intended as an anti-aircraft gun.

In a Hunter Unit, that woman could go one hundred hits for one hundred shots. In the flesh, she actually might be able to shoot through the eye of a needle.

Observing her skill, the deputy captain broke out in a cold sweat. As a devotee of the Saint, he was a soldier who welcomed death at her command. But, an outstanding soldier himself, he hesitated when faced with being shot like a dog in a certain and pointless death.

In that case...

The deputy captain steeled his nerves, cast aside his rifle, and launched himself at Suzuka. If he tried to shoot, Sophia would certainly shoot him. His only choice was to suppress Suzuka before he was shot.

I just need to grab her! I'm definitely stronger!!

Suzuka appeared as fragile as a young noblewoman. A professional military man could surely immobilize her.

"That's what you're thinking, isn't it?" Suzuka's eyes narrowed like one who had recognized her opponent's intent and would trample it.

A moment later, the deputy captain could no longer obey the laws of gravity. His body was flying a shocking distance from the ground. Before he could ask why, the hands of an unseen force seized him and slammed him to the floor.

"This is called *budo*. My country developed it over one thousand years ago to extinguish that strength you're so proud of!"

The principle was simple: return your opponent's force and add your own. That was all. However, it required an intense process of trial and error, as well as study of the human body and the principles of dynamics, resulting in a godly art.

"Why you..." Unable to defend himself, he hit the ground with a barrage of blows to his body that prevented the deputy captain from getting up.

The special combat unit was completely trapped. If they didn't get past Suzuka, they couldn't defeat Sophia. If they tried to shoot Suzuka, Sophia would pick them off. If they tried to defeat Suzuka in hand-to-hand combat, she would

take them out the moment they touched her.

“Our only option was to fire all at once with the expectation of getting shot, but we lost too many men at the start.”

Suzuka had already finished off half the soldiers in the special combat unit. Any further deaths would hinder any future plan.

“Yeah, so let me handle this!”

Another soldier joined them. The man was Toolman the Bulletproof Baron, the man leading the special combat unit.

“Oh my... How brave and manly of you!” Suzuka laughed—ha ha ha!—without tension, but her stance left no opening.

She was an expert practitioner of *budo*, so she could tell how skilled her opponent was from the way he moved.

Well, well... He's quite a monster!

She determined immediately that she shouldn't let down her guard against this opponent.

“I will not hold back.” Toolman smoothly drew the *katana* at his side.

“That weapon is from my country. It brings back memories of home.”

“Is that so? Then taste it to the fullest!”

The two appeared to be engaging in a lively conversation instead of entering into combat. However, the distance between them was narrowing.

All I can do is watch this...

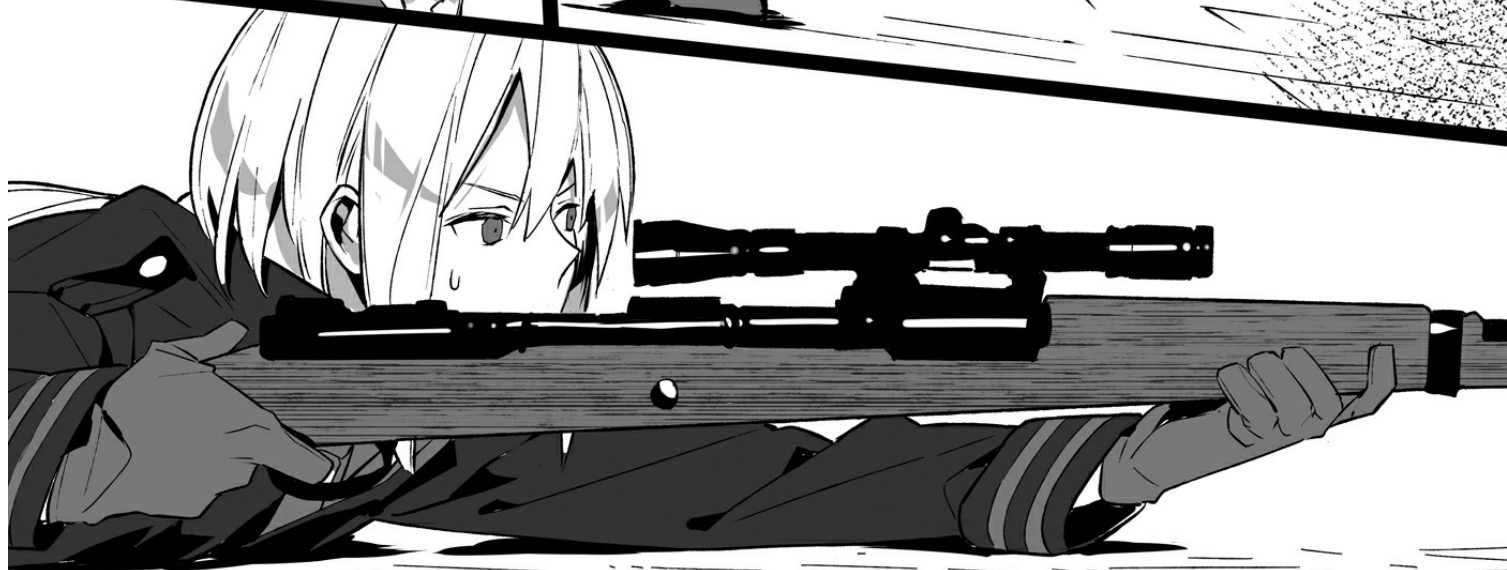
Sophia was looking for a chance to shoot from her hiding place, but Toolman wasn't giving her a shot. At this distance, she might hit Suzuka.

“Come on...”

Suzuka could instantly defeat anyone who touched her, and Toolman could lop off the arm of a humanoid Hunter Unit. They were closing in on each other.

“—!!”

Wordlessly, the two clashed.



Sven and Blitzdonner were headed underground toward Meitzer. They had lost Daian's sketch of the facility, but they had been this way once before.

"Where's that thing?" Sven asked as she ran.

"Well, it wasn't in its original place. I suppose it has been stored away."

"Or has it already been thrown away?"

"I'm not sure, but I *think*..."

Before they descended underground, the two were trying to complete another matter of business, but someone appeared in the hallway ahead.

"A special combat unit soldier?!" Blitzdonner stopped.

Sophia and Suzuka were drawing away most of the soldiers. There shouldn't be any here. They expected any soldiers to be stationed at the cell, but...

"This is her tactic, huh?" Sven bit her lip in frustration. This must have been the Saint's work. Nothing else made sense. Only this was capable of stopping her in her tracks.

"Go back. I don't want to get rough." Lud Langart blocked the way.

"Master!!"

There was no hesitation in his eyes. He was lucid. The Saint must have ordered him to prevent anyone from proceeding beyond this point. Yes, he was here because the woman he thought was Sven had asked him to be.

"Langart! What the heck?!" Blitzdonner raised his left arm, the one that still moved.

"Svelgen, you go ahead. I'll handle this—"

Even though he wasn't himself, fighting her beloved master was more painful to Sven than the torments of hell.

"Major Blitzdonner! Leave this to me!"

"What?!" Blitzdonner doubted his ears.

"Don't be foolish! That's Lud Langart!"

A few days ago, Sven had sworn her love for him.

“Yes, that’s right. He’s my beloved master! That’s why! I can’t let anyone *else* be the one to hurt him!”

“You...” Looking into Sven’s eyes, Blitzdonner understood the truth.

She intended to suppress Lud without harming him. No injuries, not even a scratch. No one else could hurt him, even a little.

“Understood.” Blitzdonner couldn’t argue.

Sven was completely determined.

“I’ll bring back General Douglas as quickly as I can. Hang in there until then!”

That was all he could do. Blitzdonner took off running. Lud moved to stop him.

“Not happening!” Sven tried to stop Lud.

Lud was human. As a humanoid Hunter Unit, Sven’s physical strength far surpassed his. However, she had to fight without hurting him. She had to control her punches carefully. Her advantage disappeared. The two grappled and glared at each other.

“Wait!”

Unable to watch Blitzdonner as he left, Sven concentrated every nerve on stopping but not harming Lud.

Meitzer heard footsteps approaching his underground cell.

Who is it this time?

Man, woman, elderly person, child... The footsteps didn’t quite sound like any of these. They didn’t sound like they came from a human being at all.

“Oh... it’s you?” Meitzer spoke bluntly, as if it finally made sense.

“General Douglas, I have come to rescue you. I’m—”

“You’re Major Blitzdonner from Apuvea, Wiltia’s intelligence agency. I’ve heard of you.”

“You know me?” Blitzdonner was surprised at Noa’s intelligence-gathering

abilities that gave Meitzer so many details about him, such as whether he was alive or dead, or active in a ghost unit.

“Good. It’s faster this way. Come with me!”

“I would like to leave, but this cell is sturdy, and I’m bound.”

“Oh, right!!”

Blitzdonner made a fist with his left hand and punched the stone wall. He wasn’t lashing out in frustration. The wall was made of stone over one hundred years old. He needed to break through to rescue Meitzer.

“Don’t be reckless. Your fist isn’t made for this!”

“Never mind! There’s no time!”

Blitzdonner’s mechanical arm was made for combat, but not for demolition. He would damage the joints and actuators.

“Gruaaaarrgh!”

And his mechanical arm was connected to flesh-and-blood nerves. Any injury to the mechanism attached to his body would directly affect his nerves and cause intense pain. It was in fact unbearable pain that made even a grown man cry out.

“We need to get back fast! I don’t know what will become of them!”

Blitzdonner ignored the agony and finally broke through the wall, creating a space wide enough for Meitzer to pass through.

“Whoa...”

Meitzer looked truly impressed. He felt grateful toward this person who possessed strength surpassing what he could imagine.

“Well done! I suspected as much. You guys are very strong.”

“Whah?!”

Blitzdonner’s reply to Meitzer sounded rude but it was because of his pain and impatience.

“I’ll break your bonds. This may hurt a bit, but you’ll have to bear it.”

“I don’t mind. Bang away.”

Blitzdonner summoned his last strength and tore apart Meitzer’s bonds. His arm finally broke completely.

“Now I’m useless. I’m counting on you for the rest. Go help them. Langart and Sven.”

“What?”

Meitzer’s eyes opened wide with astonishment.

“Wait, Major Blitzdonner. Those two are *here*? Why?”

“You asked Sven if she wanted to be human, so she and Lud came to help you, but...” Blitzdonner briefly explained the situation to Meitzer, just covering the main points.

“She did what?! That was foolish!” Meitzer was genuinely shocked and saddened at the Saint’s cruelty.

“Right now, Svelgen is holding Lud back with all her strength. Hurry up and snap him out of it!”

“You think I have a way to return him to normal?”

Meitzer didn’t understand the meaning behind what God had told Sven.

“What? Are you saying you *don’t*?!”

“What is that person trying to do? Or to make *me* do? Surely not...”

Meitzer finally realized what those words might mean.

“This is utterly reckless! Does he want to remove the girl from this world?!”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no time to explain. Anyway, let’s go to Sven and Langart!”

Meitzer began running without a moment to spare.

“Hey, w-wait! You’re fast!!”

Blitzdonner followed in the wake of the man whose legs were even more powerful than his own mechanical limbs.

Chapter 7: The Saint

“I am God’s bride.” The girl spoke to Lud with a face so sad it was hard to believe she ordinarily wore a smile.

“Bride? What do you mean?” Lud felt a tightening in his chest as he asked.

“Exactly what I said. The True System is the foundation of the empire. It’s the ultimate computerized and synchronized intelligence of all the citizens of the nation.”

The True System was the collective intelligence that provided answers to any question. It gave a reason for living and everyone had to obey it. It told them exactly what they should do.

“God is perfect. It gives perfect instructions. What to eat, what to do, who to fall in love with... It teaches everything.”

“That’s... um...”

She was describing a world he couldn’t imagine. This was understandable. According to her, it was a world where the people of the capital had relinquished the duty of making their own choices; using freedom to abandon freedom.

“They call it God, but it’s their caretaker. And that being wanted a companion.” The girl didn’t know why. She didn’t know why she was chosen. “But no thank you. I don’t want to be that thing’s spouse!”

Another person might have obeyed without questioning. But, she couldn’t accept a life decided according to God’s whims.

“I need to ask a favor. Please, take me away from here!” The girl begged him to help her.

He was the only one she could rely on. Others, unable to understand her suffering, might have considered her strange... perhaps even abnormal.

“Understood. Let’s run away.” He couldn’t refuse her request. He couldn’t

simply watch as she lived a miserable life.

“If we leave the capital and go far away, no one will pursue us.”

However, that was a dangerous path. It meant abandoning a paradise blessed by God. They might die within a few days.

“Thank you. Let’s go!”

She knew all of that. In full understanding, she wanted this. She asked to make her own choice even if it meant losing her life.

Lud was attacking fiercely, and Sven was skillfully dodging. She wasn’t just defending herself. She was expertly controlling his attacks. She could do nothing else. She desperately kept at it, waiting for Lud to exhaust his strength.

Lud doesn’t disappoint... If I were a human, I’d have died many times by now!

She realized once again how fearsome Lud was in hand-to-hand combat. Just when she thought he would attack with his muscles and large frame, he accurately determined that Sven was stronger and he switched to using his nimble footwork. That would ordinarily throw off an experienced soldier and create an opening.

As a soldier, he’s such a realist...

She had known that ever since she had welcomed him inside her when she was a Hunter Unit. Even under a surprise attack by the enemy military, he had the decisiveness and adaptability to respond immediately. He was a true soldier with a spirit of steel, unyielding no matter what the predicament.

But...

As she dodged Lud’s fists, she suddenly remembered the first day she visited Tockerbrot. His big round back had been hunched over inside the empty shop.

I could hardly believe he was the same person.

She had reunited with him more than two years after he quit the military. Her chest had tightened at the sight of his sad face. He was feared as a frightening former soldier and ostracized by the townsfolk, yet he continued baking bread

no one would eat. Sven had known that she must do something. She had to find a way to ease his suffering, if only a little. And think of something to increase his joy, if only a little.

A lot had happened. They had fought special operations soldiers from August, battled young soldiers and mechanical soldiers from Greyten on an airship, worked together to save their business against a billionaire, almost lost their lives when they were targeted by the Schutzstaffel, baked bread for Thanksgiving and *baumkuchen* for the Holy Festival... So many things had happened.

“Urgh!” As if vexed at Sven for dodging his ferocious attacks, Lud drew the pistol at his hip.

“—?!”

He pointed the muzzle at Sven. For a moment, the two stopped and silence reigned.

“Unnngh...!!” Lud moaned in agony. Then he threw the gun in his hand aside.

Yes, I should think so!

Relief filled Sven. Lud had said it himself. To eat was to live. Someone who fed others for a living couldn't kill. For that reason, he had always loathed killers. He had stuck to that belief even when he was in danger.

You haven't changed.

Sven was relieved because no matter what happened, Lud Langart remained the same.

“Enough... Please, just leave!” Lud spoke as if in pain. “I suspect you're stronger than I am. You could easily kill me. But you don't. I think you're a kind person.”

It wasn't strange that he noticed how his opponent tried not to hurt him. He was kind. That was why he couldn't stand to fight any longer. He hadn't willingly held the pistol. Toolman had probably given it to him.

“You must have something you can't forsake. I do too. I understand... so... I want you to leave!” Lud suddenly fell to his knees and lowered his head. He

bent into a deep bow. He was bowing to the enemy.

“Master...” Immense sadness and frustration welled inside Sven.

This man hadn’t changed. He would never change. He would reject the option to kill even if it meant feeding his pride to the dogs. He was that kind of person. She knew that better than anyone. However...

“Why?!”

“What?”

Sven’s shoulders were trembling. An unknown feeling was growing inside her. It was anger, intense anger. She had known intense anger many times. She had let her iron fists fly at anyone threatening her beloved Lud. This time was different. This was a first. She was angry at *Lud*.

“Just three days ago, you swore you would love me forever!!”

“W-What are you talking about?”

From Lud’s point of view, a woman whose name he didn’t know had suddenly started sputtering nonsense.

“But some woman from who-knows-where overwrote your memory and you forgot all about me!!!!”

His response only fueled the flame of Sven’s anger.

“Master, you... you...”

That anger pushed her over a line she had never been able to cross.

“You’re a dummy, Lud!!!!”

A terrible sound—*smack!*—echoed through the castle. Sobbing, the humanoid Hunter Unit, who had vowed to lose her own life protecting her master, slapped the cheek of the man she loved.

“What was that?”

Blitzdonner and Meitzer came running. What they saw was Sven, frozen and wearing an expression that said “Now I’ve done it!” and Lud, knocked unconscious against the wall.

“What have you done, Svelgen? You’ve...!” Blitzdonner gawped.

“N-No, I haven’t!! Well, I *did*, but... I didn’t *kill* him!”

Lud was unconscious but his arms and legs were twitching. Sven had sworn absolute loyalty to Lud. No matter how distraught, no matter how angry, she had always stopped short of crossing this line.

“I j-just... slipped... I couldn’t control myself. What have I done?!” Sven looked at her hand, the one she had used to slap Lud, as if it were a monster.

“Well, um... it couldn’t be helped. This time, it was his fault.” Blitzdonner scratched his head as he spoke. He wasn’t consoling her. He was just stating a fact.

“His fault?! He’s a victim!”

“That’s not true.” Sven had argued back, and Blitzdonner tried to reassure her. “Langart was to blame the moment he made you so unhappy.”

“What?” Sven didn’t notice she was crying until Blitzdonner told her.

“This has been hard for you, Sven.” Meitzer looked at her as he spoke.

“You’re safe? I’m glad.”

“What? You were worried about me?”

“No! It’s just... without you, we can’t return Master to normal.”

“Oh, I see.” With a wry laugh, Meitzer approached the unconscious Lud. “I see... This?” He picked something up. “What is that?”

“It’s a small transmitter.”

The transmitter was so small it was unnoticeable inside Lud’s ear.

“She... The Saint was speaking to Langart with this. That’s how she was controlling him.”

It was a tiny transmitter that neither August nor Wiltia had developed yet. The Saint had made it with the knowledge she possessed from the ancient empire.

“It’s a dirty trick.” Meitzer crushed it in his hand.

“So, since he isn’t wearing it anymore, Master will return to normal?”

“No. She has overwritten Langart’s memory and changed his feelings about the girl he calls Sven. That has to be corrected.”

“How do we do that?”

Meitzer looked at Sven.

“*You* have to do it. The only way is for you to enter his heart and destroy any remnants of the Saint.”

“Enter his heart?”

That was easier said than done.

“There is a faint trace of rezanium in Langart’s body.”

Lud had died once. It was around the time Sven first visited Tockerbrot. A relic of the ancient empire had been kept behind a Door, and she had used it to mediate with rezanium in order to revive him.

“Sven, you have the power to control all the rezanium vessels in this world.”

“I have that power? Why?”

Rezanium was a red crystal said to be a natural generator and a calculation device. Under a certain amount of pressure, it would generate electricity, and at a specific voltage, it would release vibrations. It was structurally the same as the oscillators of quartz built into small clocks. However, its output was much more powerful.

The rare genius Daian Fortuner had used that principle to create the artificial intelligence in the power reactors of Hunter Units.

“It’s possible because you have rezanium inside you and rezanium is what God left on the surface of the earth as a final blessing.”

“God... The voice that spoke to me. What is that? What’s your relationship to it?”

Sven had long thought the two were the same. However, the voice had denied it.

“I’m like an avatar. God can no longer intervene in the world so God created

me as a representative of his will.”

Meitzer called himself the Devil. According to some religions, the Devil was born from God’s shadow. The Devil had committed the unforgivable sin of imitating God.

“My second coming into the world was fifteen years ago, about the time Wiltia opened a Door and started developing weapons powered by rezanium. I had died once in battle against the Saint, but when God learned that rezanium was active in the world again, I was reborn to arbitrate with and protect the human race.”

“W-Wait a second. I can’t keep up with this.” Sven was growing surprised and afraid at Meitzer’s tale, which was starting to surpass her understanding and imagination. “What is rezanium?! It’s not just some rare ore?!”

Even though it was a foundation for the world’s military, science and technology, mysteries remained. According to traditional myth, the red stone was the mineralized heart of an ancient dragon.

“Anyway... here’s what it is...” Meitzer paused before revealing a secret about the origin of the world. “It’s God. The ancient empire made the True System, an enormous crystallized calculation device. It broke apart and pieces scattered across the continent of Europea. Those pieces are rezanium and they are pieces of God.”

The True System was a god manufactured by the ancient empire. It was a crystal calculation device made up of giant rezanium crystals. The empire had synchronized and bound the brains of ten million citizens. By combining all into one, it created a world of eternal tranquility, as well as the True System to manage it.

“But a slight disturbance emerged in God—the being who was all for one and one for all—and that was his ego.”

You might say it was God’s *will*. God desired someone. God wanted someone to look upon him. He desired an *other* upon whom he could gaze.

“God learned of a girl in the imperial capital of Europea, the only citizen refusing computerization and not included in synchronization. He wanted to

know more about her. Wanting her to know him, his first spontaneous desire was to make that girl his bride.”

The girl detested the idea of being included in the system, so she would never agree to become “the Saint.”

She would sometimes slip out of the imperial capital and had become friends with a young man living in the slum outside. She fell in love with him and decided to abandon the imperial capital.

“The Saint rejected God’s affection. That is a truth the world doesn’t know.”

“Hey, that’s...”

Meitzer spoke the truth of the old world. Blitzdonner had once heard the same story from Daian.

“Saint Europa rejected God’s advances, so he got mad and destroyed the world.”

“According to God’s contract with the Saint, he would grant her every wish. The Saint could control everything that contained rezanium.”

The events Meitzer was relaying were absurd and too unimaginable for Sven to accept. However, she couldn’t dispel one doubt about herself.

“I’m not the Saint!” She was Svelgen Avei. She had once been an assistive A.I. in a Hunter Unit, and now she was a humanoid mechanical doll.

“Yes, that’s right. However, you *are* the Saint.” Then he revealed an even more unexpected truth. “You are the deceased Saint brought back to life with a synthetic soul and synthetic body.”

Using blood from the Saint’s remains, Daian Fortuner created synthetic flesh and pseudo body fluid. Sven was born when he transplanted the rezanium reactor from the Hunter Unit known as Avei into the mechanical doll he had created.

“Your heart is like the strings of a musical instrument. The fluctuations it produces... the waves... Anyway, *something* like that artificially recreated the Saint’s fluctuations.”

Human beings do not understand the structure of their own spirit. European

science defined the human spirit as composed of three parts. The *soul*, the *spirit* and the *heart*. Avei's soul and Sven's heart recreated the ancient Saint's spirit.

"Didn't God say so?"

At Meitzer's question, Sven remembered. She recalled his first words to her.

"It seems you were born a slightly different way."

This was utterly absurd. However, if it was true, it made sense. Rezanium powered August's autonomous tanks and the airship *Defairedead*. Sven had been able to control both, if only temporarily.

"You once almost opened a Door beneath Berun."

"You know about *that* too?"

Threatened by Genitz during his rebellion, she had opened a Door. That had incurred God's wrath. The power coursing through the open door turned Genitz into a pillar of salt.

"That same thing happened to ten million people. That's the truth of the destruction of the European Empire."

Hardly anything remained of the empire that existed one thousand years ago. That might also have been due to God's wrath. The nation's capital, the central government, the energy source and countless citizens... all destroyed in an instant because God willed that the flourishing empire must disappear.

"It finally makes sense. That's why that woman called me a fake." Sven now understood why it felt as if she were seeing herself when she met the Saint. "Is that woman the real Saint?"

This absurd story continued. Sven was about to say that it would be very strange if someone from one thousand years ago was still alive. But Meitzer said no.

"She isn't the Saint."

"What?" Sven was puzzled, but Meitzer said no more.

"For now, you must rescue Langart. That's something only you can do."

"No, wait! First—" Having listened so far, Blitzdonner jumped in. "Svelgen,

first there's something I want you to do."

The Saint was waiting quietly in the castle's office. Events were proceeding in a slightly different direction from her calculations. That was not a problem. Her expectations included even this variation. She knew what humans were like. No matter how carefully you led them, they were foolish and headstrong. That was why God had forsaken them. There was no need to lead the blockheads any further, so he had erased them with his own hands and departed.

The Saint was different. She needed to be loved. If her plan worked, she would be one step closer to God.

"Just you wait. I shall reach you."

Svelgen went inside Lud's heart. It was surprisingly easy. She poured her spirit through the trace of rezanium inside Lud. The next thing she knew, she entered his world. However...

"Where am I?"

It was a grassland. Was it an imaginary landscape? She had never been inside someone's heart, so it was a world she didn't understand. If Sven had been human, she might have described it as a dream world.

She saw people running in the distance. One was Lud. Another was the woman called the Saint. They were being pursued by a group of men wearing masks and wrapped in black robes, like priests in a heretical religion.

Who are they?

Sven ran toward them. Gradually their voices became audible. The two fleeing were eventually driven to the edge of a cliff.

"Why won't you leave us alone?"

"I don't want to be God's companion."

"I want to stay married to this person for life."

Sven could hear the distraught girl's cries. However, the masked men in black would not listen to her.

What is this? Is it familiar?

Her chest felt constricted as she ran closer. The sound of firing rang out as she was about to reach them. A gunshot. Something like a small firearm had been fired. Lud collapsed, blood spurting from his mouth.

“That’s good.”

“The fool. He played with the Saint.”

“He’s merely a Shepherd!”

The men in black showered Lud with abuse. Crying and screaming, the Saint clung to Lud. But, he was dead. No matter how much they shouted, he would not wake up.

“Let’s go back, Saint.”

“God is waiting for *you*.”

The men in black seized the Saint, ready to drag her if they must.

No, stop! You mustn’t!

Sven tried to shout, but could make no sound. She knew... She knew what was about to happen.

“I won’t do what you want!”

“My life is my own! I will live the way I want!”

“My heart lies with him!”

Raising her voice in determination, the Saint clasped Lud’s body and jumped from the cliff.

“What has she done?!”

“This is awful!”

The men in black raised a commotion in their panic.

“What will we tell God?!”

“We’ll prepare a replacement.”

“Yes. If we make him a copy, God will understand.”

The men in black turned on their heels and left. They behaved as if the two corpses at the bottom of the cliff didn't exist.

No... This is bad.

The scenery changed before her eyes. It was now a city. It was a world so closely resembling a heavenly temple that it made the royal capital of Berun look like a country village. Several tall castle-like towers rose overhead and the geometrical cityscape looked like a work of art.

Suddenly the city crumbled. Light from a giant red crystal floating in the center of the city destroyed every building, like sand exposed to ocean waves. Nothing remained. Everything faded and disappeared.

"God, why do you treat us like this?!"

"We did everything for you!"

"Please, pardon us! Forgive us!"

She saw the men dressed in black. They were desperately begging for forgiveness, but the red light showed no mercy. They too disappeared.

That is... God.

The brilliant red crystal did not look the way humans envisioned their God. But, it certainly wasn't human and it wielded overwhelming power, so it must be God.

I see... This is Europea's imperial capital.

Meitzer spoke of this. He said the Saint used her memories to control Lud's spirit. This world was *her* memory.

Hm?

However...

Didn't the Saint just die at the cliff?

The moment this question arose, the scenery changed once again. A grass field again. Lud and the Saint were standing in the middle. The two were on their knees and offering thanks.

Did time turn back? No...

She heard a voice. The voice wasn't Meitzer's but she recognized it. It was the voice of God.

What did you say?

Sven doubted her ears. God spoke...

"I am sorry."

An apology from God was unthinkable. In the first place, this god was created by the European Empire for their "perfect world." God was perfect yet had admitted a mistake and apologized.

Oh my...

Then Sven noticed something. She had sensed a strangeness about Lud. She felt something was missing. At last, she saw what it was.

His scar isn't there!

His face had no large scar. She knew that scar well. During the Great War, they had tried to protect friendly forces from enemy fire and the cockpit was nearly destroyed. His face was stabbed by the debris and he was left with that awful scar. She knew it well because it had happened inside her.

What is going on?

As she wondered, the scenery shifted. It was a town. This world wasn't glorious like the imperial capital. It was a town lined with hovels and tent shops as if erected amidst ruins. Lud, still without the scar, was here with the Saint. However, they had changed.

"You always...!"

"Shut up! Don't say anything about my methods!"

"I *will* speak up! That's my role!"

"Shut up! You're a *fake*!"

Their atmosphere between them was tense and hostile. What in the world was happening? As the two quarreled, they ripped bits off a chunk of bread they were sharing.

"Argh! Isn't there anything that tastes better than this?!"

“If you’re gonna complain, don’t eat it!”

“What an awful thing to say!”

They were so grumpy that they couldn’t seem to talk without bickering.

“What’s going on?” Without thinking, Sven spoke. Then...

“What?” The Saint turned toward Sven as if looking into the distance.

“—?!” Surprised, Sven braced herself.

This was Lud’s spirit world. The scene was a memory. It was like a scene in a movie. However, the characters were aware of a spectator who had spoken out, which was impossible.

“Oh, you made it this far? Did that Devil put you up to this? This fake doesn’t know her place!” The Saint approached Sven with anger and contempt. “Get lost!”

“Uh-oh!!”

By the time Sven realized, it was too late. The Saint released her power and cut off the lower half of Sven’s body.

“Aagh!”

It was a single blow capable of killing a human. Sven collapsed to the ground.

“This is perfect. Now sink. Fall into spiritual mud and disappear in soul and spirit!”

The ground turned to mud and began swallowing Sven.

“Urgh... Darn it!”

Sven flailed both arms and desperately tried to crawl out, but the more she struggled, the more her body sank.

“It’s no use.” The Saint sneered.

Her face was so hateful that Sven clenched her teeth and struggled with more determination. However, she could not free herself. On the contrary, she sank further.

“Master... Master!!” Sven desperately called to Lud.

“It’s no use, no use at all.”

As Sven struggled, the Saint continued to taunt and sneer.

“I’ve locked him in a world of memories. He cannot sense you. That’s the way I designed it.”

Sven was buried up to her neck. Her hands, with nothing to seize onto, grabbed only air. The Saint may have expected this and planted her pseudo self in Lud’s spirit world in case Sven intervened.

Everything goes the way she plans...

Struggle as she might, Sven didn’t expect to survive. There was nothing she could do. Her heart would be sealed in the Saint’s memory and Lud would forget himself forever.

“No!” That was too sad and too hard. Too difficult to bear. “Master! Master!” Desperately, she begged for Lud’s help. He didn’t have to help her. It would be enough if he looked at her, even without recognizing her. Sven couldn’t stand to just disappear from his world.

“I told you it was futile, didn’t I?” The Saint spoke coldly.

Lud didn’t turn around. He didn’t even glance her way. Her words didn’t reach him.

“Master!” Nonetheless, Sven cried out. “Master, Master... Lud!!”

Then a miracle occurred.

“What?” The smug smile disappeared from the Saint’s face.

Something appeared on Lud’s left cheek. It was his scar, the cross-shaped war scar. The scar he got fighting alongside Avei.

“Master...”

Then something appeared on his right cheek as well. It was a handprint. Sven’s handprint from when she slapped Lud earlier.

“Whaaat?!”

Sven was astounded as Lud slowly turned toward her. Then he spoke.

“Sven...?”

He was looking at her, seeing her, *Sven*, and he had said her name.

“Impossible!” The Saint was shocked.

Her expression clearly said that she thought what just happened was absolutely impossible. Yet it had happened. Sven’s beloved Lud had just said her name, so... She was no longer afraid of anything!

“Graaaaahhh!”

With an explosion, the muddy bog imprisoning her was blown away. Her severed body was healed. She pushed with both feet against the ground and her red eyes glared at the Saint.

“No... Impossible! Why?!”

Sven ran toward the thunderstruck woman. Then...

“How dare you attempt to seduce my master! Take this!!”

This wasn’t a slap like she had given to Lud. This was a steely fist that bashed into the Saint’s face.

“Gugh!!”

The Saint made a sound as if being crushed and her apparition split apart. In that instant, the world began to crack. The world of false memories the Saint had generated began to crumble.

“Let’s go, Master!”

“Sven... What did I...?”

“It’s okay! Everything is fine!”

Lud was bewildered, but she gripped his hand and they started running. Nothing mattered now. Lud remembered her. He had said her name. Now that she was sure that she existed inside him, there was nothing to contend with. The two had returned.

Chapter 8: Tricky Humans

No matter how unrealistic dreams may be, they seem very real at the time. For example, you might dream that you are a giant insect eating people. While you're dreaming, you think human children taste good. When people wake up from such a nightmare, even if they don't remember much about it, an intense feeling of revulsion can persist.

"Ugh... uh... whoa..."

As he woke up, that's exactly how Lud felt.

"Master, do you recognize me?"

Sven was standing in front of him.

"Sven...?"

"Yes..."

When he said her name, she trembled with joy. Then she wept as she clung to him.

"Sven... I'm sorry."

Lud didn't remember what had happened or what he had done. However, seeing her joy as he said her name told him that he had made her suffer.

"It's all right! It doesn't matter now!"

As Sven assured him, it really didn't matter. Lud had returned to normal.

"Whew... It appears we've avoided the worst."

When he saw them, Meitzer laughed.

"Meitzer...?"

"Yeah. How do you feel? Does it hurt anywhere?"

Lud had come to rescue him, but *he* was worried about Lud.

"I will call you Douglas Meitzer for now."

Sven looked at Meitzer warily.

“When I went into Master’s heart, I glimpsed the Saint’s memory.”

“Oh?”

She had seen the Saint killed without marrying the man she loved. She witnessed the moment the European Empire was destroyed, the reappearance of the Saint and her beloved, and the conversation with God.

“What mistake did God make? Why did he apologize to the humans?”

Sven still couldn’t understand the mystery of that moment.

“God fell in love with the Saint. But the Saint loved another man.”

Sven had seen the Saint refuse to become God’s bride and finally take her own life.

“God was sad his love did not touch the Saint. He was supposed to be a perfect being, but his failure thoroughly upset him. To God, however, that was a joyous occurrence.”

He had fallen in love and was able to suffer the agony of unrequited love.

“God had suffered because his own existence was ambiguous, but the Saint had helped him feel alive. He was happy because he could love. He did not mind if she wouldn’t even look at him. He wanted her and her beloved to be happy.”

The people of Europea did not understand that. So they tried to drag the Saint back to God and separate her from her loved one. As a result, the two lovers died.

“When the first woman he had loved was killed, God went mad with rage. He was so angry he destroyed the great empire in one night.”

“That’s...excessive. No... but...”

Sven was surprised, but she could understand how God felt. The one who had given God a heart had been hurt and killed. How could he not wish for the world’s destruction? How could he resist using his power?

“After God destroyed Europea, he brought the two back to life with his remaining power. Then God, the True System, crumbled and scattered. The

rezanium pieces spread across the continent of Europea... and here we are today.”

Even with God’s power, bringing the dead back to life was a gargantuan feat.

“As atonement, he entered a contract promising he would make the wishes of her successor come true.”

The Saint’s successor was Sven, and as a new iteration of the Saint, she would inherit a power like divine protection.

“Is that so? I’ve understood that much, so... who is that woman, the woman called the Saint?”

“Well... first let’s go back up to Major Blitzdonner. That situation should be reaching a conclusion soon.”

“The major? Where is he?”

Hearing the man mentioned, Lud looked around. Blitzdonner was nowhere to be seen.

“He went to do what he must.”

Lud’s group headed inside the castle to find Blitzdonner.

Meanwhile in the castle’s large hall, Suzuka and Toolman continued to battle.

“Hyaaaah!!”

A *katana*’s greatest strength was the mobility afforded by its sharpness and ability to cut. Its many slashing attacks were so accurate even Suzuka could not completely defend against them although it was said that her highly polished martial arts could send anyone who touched her flying.

“You’re... a difficult opponent.” The smile she wore was beginning to waver.

“What’s wrong, woman of Yamato? Is that all you’ve got?”

“—?!”

Toolman was suddenly speaking in the language of Yamato.

“I’m surprised. You appear to be quite knowledgeable about my country.” In a

cold sweat, Suzuka replied in her own language.

Four centuries ago, there was great internal strife in Yamato. National opinion was split regarding the correct direction toward modernization. The central government and frontier warrior groups clashed fiercely. After that war, many left their motherland. Yamato had once considered itself a warrior state. The warriors who had instigated the strife were from a tribe praised as Yamato's strongest.

"I'm pleased your sword comes from such a master swordsman. I have encountered someone who can swing it with consummate skill."

Toolman appeared expressionless and emotionless—doll-like—as he smiled faintly and raised his sword. It was an unusual stance. He gripped the *katana* with both hands and pointed the tip upward as if hoisting it.

"The Dragonfly Stance of Jigen Style?"

"You know it."

"Indeed I do."

It was a stance Suzuka remembered. A friend of her grandfather was a practitioner of the same technique. She remembered how overwhelmed she had been at his ferocious fighting spirit, even as an elderly man.

The No Second Blade Stance infuses the entire body and soul into one sword for striking the opponent. It was the ultimate skill. Without a thought of dodging, the swordsman struck with his entire life force. It was said to be the deepest secret.

"My name is Leia Toolman. However, that is not my real name."

He did not *have* a real name. Orphans were gathered by the dozen, assigned a number, and subjected to extremely harsh training before being given a random name.

"I do not know the origin of my name. I heard that the person who was in charge of me took it from the character of a book he was reading."

More consideration would be given to naming a dog or cat. The Saint's devotees had not even been afforded that attention.

“I never doubted or thought it was unfair. However, I have never discovered joy in fighting either.”

But then he encountered the expert martial artist Suzuka. For Toolman, that was a stroke of great fortune.

“This technique has no regard for what happens if my opponent dodges. If I hit, I kill in one blow. If I miss, I die. Easy to understand, isn’t it?”

If Toolman’s sword struck, he would win. If Suzuka dodged him, he would be defenseless and she would defeat him. It was an all-or-nothing attack and he felt joy for the first time at being able to use it.

“Here I come!!”

Toolman launched and closed in with an odd monkey-like cry—“Kyaieeee!” Suzuka prepared to defend.

“What?!”

Something intervened. Someone threw *something* that pierced Toolman’s chest and stopped him.

“What... is this? A *hand*?!”

It was the arm of a girl. It was not a human arm. It was the severed right arm of a mechanical doll, a humanoid Hunter Unit. With the hand positioned in a martial arts chop, it had been thrown like a spear and impaled Toolman’s chest.

“W... what the?!”

Coughing up copious blood, he looked behind and saw a man and woman dressed in crimson. One was Blitzdonner. The other was Rebecca.

“We made it in time.” Rebecca’s voice was cold and collected.

“The red girl? You... came back to life?”

Suzuka had heard from Blitzdonner that the Saint had defeated and killed Rebecca.

“I would have died, but this time I owe thanks to Svelgen.”

After her encounter with the Saint, Rebecca had stopped functioning. The Saint had turned off Rebecca’s rezanium reactor, which was her heart and

brain. However, Sven could also control rezanium. Before Lud recovered, Blitzdonner and Sven were able to repair Rebecca.

“I see. But I’m surprised you’re safe. I thought you were destroyed.”

“Yes... I was aware of that.”

She had been moved while nonfunctional to a safe place.

“I never imagined she would save me this way.”

Rebecca was smiling bitterly, a rare thing for her.

“You jerks... Why did you interfere in the fight?!”

Toolman cursed them as he collapsed, spewing blood. He used his remaining life to express fury at those who had interfered with a battle between warriors.

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is war. If you wanted ceremonial duels, you should never have become a soldier.” Rebecca icily contradicted him. “You were trying to start a world war, yet you want a clean conclusion for yourself? That’s asking too much.”

“Ungh...” Lacking the strength to argue any further, or perhaps unable to find words for a retort, Toolman drew his last breath.

If it had been someone else’s fight, Rebecca might not have interfered. She might have prevented Blitzdonner from doing so. Another person’s past and their dreams for the future wouldn’t have mattered to her. Toolman was different. Indiscriminately delivering death and ignoring emotion and principles was the reality of war.

“What a pitiful man!”

As she spoke, Suzuka looked at Toolman’s corpse. She understood what Rebecca was saying. She understood this was the end Toolman had to suffer. Suzuka pitied Toolman, who died just as he experienced the life he might have had.

“The rest of you soldiers should end this now.” She urged the Saint’s remaining followers to stop and prevent Toolman’s death from going to waste.

There were less than ten soldiers left. They had little chance of defeating

Suzuka and Sophia, and now would also face Rebecca and Blitzdonner.

“It’s no use,” Rebecca said coldly.

As if intent on proving otherwise, the remaining soldiers raised their firearms and faced their opponents.

“I am not human, but I’m like them in that I have a mission I must fulfill.”

For that reason, Rebecca could somewhat understand how the Saint’s devotees felt.

“The meaning and purpose of the mission is irrelevant to the people who have lived and died for it. They know no other way.”

No one knows why they were born. They had to find the answer for themselves.

“To people who have lived only to obey the Saint’s commands, it doesn’t matter if they can’t fulfill those commands. They would run into a wall over and over. That’s all they know.”

They were incapable of choosing to disobey orders.

“Yes, that’s right. They cannot ignore my commands.”

Everyone froze at the sound of the voice. It was the Saint.

“No... surely not!”

The voice was coming from a transmitter. Blitzdonner looked down at Toolman’s corpse. The voice was coming from a transmitter in Toolman’s ear.

“You have done the unexpected, but I have prepared for *that*.”

The Saint did not sound unsettled. She didn’t sound concerned about Rebecca, Suzuka and Sophia’s opposition.

“I know you too well. You are foolish and are not intelligent, so you throw tantrums and resist. I have countermeasures for all of it.”

She looked down on them with contempt, she mocked and pitied them, but there was no insult. The foolishness of human beings was a simple fact to her, like the red of the setting sun. That was instantly proven.

“What?!” Sophia was the first to notice. “Impossible... Where did *they* come from?!”

One, two, three... One after another, armed soldiers emerged from the forest that surrounded the test site. Their fatigues bore no indication of their affiliation or rank. Their insignia had been ripped off. However, Sophia knew where they were from.

“Why are Augustan soldiers here?!”

These were special operations soldiers from August, the nation under the Saint’s control. There were already over fifty, equaling one platoon. If Lud and Sven could see the woman leading them, they would have been shocked into silence. It was Mary Ville Mehl.

“Now you will *despair*! Deeply, darkly and forever!” The Saint’s voice rang out through the transmitter as if to cast them straight to hell.



After Lud returned to his senses, he headed for the large hall with Sven and Meitzer. On the way there, they heard gunshots.

“What’s that?!”

Sophia and the others were in the hall. Lud was filled with an unpleasant feeling that gripped his insides, but his spirit maintained hope as he ran. When he arrived, he saw...

“What... ?”

The scene before him was hard to believe. Augustan soldiers had stormed the hall. Smoke rose from their rifles as if they had just been fired. Their leader, clad in dark green, stood in front. It was Mary Ville Mehl.

“What are *you* doing here?” Lud was surprised, but Sven was *speechless*. “I thought you died!”

After the trial in Pelfe, terrorists had killed Mary Ville Mehl for betrayal, but here she was, looking as if nothing had happened.

“The woman you call the Saint saved my life and made me the leader of August.”

“What the heck?!”

Mary Ville had many supporters in August. By making her the leader, the Saint could use Mary against Wiltia. That was the scenario the Saint had written. Nonetheless, it was a very odd scene.

“Why... are you... um...” Lud was bewildered.

The Augustan soldiers in front of him had suppressed and captured the fighters under the Saint’s command.

“Why are Augustan soldiers helping us?”

Meanwhile, Sophia and Blitzdonner’s group had not been bound, disarmed or harmed in any way. On the contrary, it would be more accurate to say they were protected.

“Take them away. They’re witnesses. And make sure they don’t commit suicide!”

Mary Ville briskly issued orders to hold the Saint's followers. She was choosing to defy the Saint's will.

"I'd say it's been awhile, but actually it hasn't."

Then, finally, she turned to Lud and the others.

"Why... did you help us?"

Mary Ville responded to Lud's timid question with a snort.

"Don't get the wrong idea! I have my own plans! This merely coincided with them! However..."

Huh?

She looked at Sven and her features softened a little.

"If things work out to your advantage, it's nothing to me!"

That was how she truly felt. At the same time, a part of her wanted to help Sven's group. She wanted to repay her obligation to the girl who loved the same man she loved, the man who had once asked her to bake bread with him, even though she had earlier opposed him.

"What is going on?"

They heard a low voice filled with anger. The Saint was again speaking through the transmitter. Security cameras had been installed around the castle that was now being used as the test site. The Saint was aware of the situation in the large hall.

"That's easy. If you drop *Verne 1* on the capital of August, many innocent citizens will die. I have prevented that." Mary Ville replied to the Saint with a firm voice.

She sounded as strong and certain as she had the day she argued against Sven and Lud in court.

"You're all the same, Saint. Just like the Wiltian military, which destroyed my hometown of Lapchuricka! You're the same because you don't care what happens to regular people when you pursue your lofty goals!"

Mary Ville's hometown and the people in it had been attacked because of a

military operation in the recent Great War. She had been injured and lost her family.

“I don’t know what you’re actually thinking as you try to control the world, and I don’t want to know! But I will tell you one thing! Our world of human beings belongs to us! So don’t play with it!”

Her determination conveyed her refusal to overlook interference, whether by the Saint or by God.

“Where did you come up with those soldiers?”

The Saint sounded surprised by Mary Ville, who had acted in defiance of the Saint’s expectations and instructions. No soldiers or factions following her should even exist.

“They are soldiers from Visario’s faction, the man you killed.”

Visario had occupied Chair Five of the Soviet Six, August’s highest decision-making body. He had joined with Genitz in plotting to organize August’s military without the Saint’s knowledge. However, the plot was discovered and he had been brutally beheaded.

“Visario’s soldiers? What have you done?!”

Mary Ville had taken over Visario’s soldiers. If she hadn’t been careful, they might have killed her. She developed connections with them and revealed the existence of *Verne 1* and the Saint’s plan to attack their own national territory.

“I told them what I knew and asked them to lend me their strength, and they agreed. That’s all.”

They had once adopted dishonest methods to achieve their aims with the argument that they could not be picky about the means to reach their ends. Mary Ville persuaded them that if their ends are righteous, then they must choose their means accordingly. She had put that into practice. Despite the threat of death, she had engaged in dialogue, asked for help, and set her plans in motion.

“She’s pretty good...”

Like the Saint, Meitzer wasn’t human, but he openly expressed his admiration

for the human Mary Ville. She had faced her situation head-on rather than deploying plots, schemes and conspiracies, and in doing so, she acted outside the Saint's calculations.

"I see... I misjudged you." The Saint spoke with open hatred.

Yes, she had misjudged the woman. She recruited Mary Ville as an idol supported by the people. However, Mary Ville had not acted as the Saint expected because she stood up for her own beliefs.

"But you're wise enough to know that I still have the advantage."

Mary Ville's soldiers had surrounded the test site and the Saint didn't have available recruits to resist them. Yet the Saint claimed the advantage.

"As long as I successfully launch *Verne 1*, I get everything I want!"

Preparations for the launch had been advancing steadily, even during the battle inside the castle.

"Less than thirty minutes remain until launch. You should get out of here. It's a large rocket, so flames will consume this whole area."

The Saint appeared to find this funny as her laughter came through the transmitter: Ha ha!

"The control room! Seize the control room and stop the launch!"

The Saint laughed again as Sophia shouted.

"You can't. It's too late."

"What?!"

"I destroyed all the equipment in the control room. There's no way you can stop the launch now."

The rocket's destination had already been programmed into *Verne 1*. They could neither stop the launch nor reprogram its commands.

"Oh, and just to be safe, I disposed of the staff as well."

The Saint had also killed Helmut and the technicians in the control room. She assured them that their lives would be saved and they would be welcomed in August, but she had broken that promise.

She had not planned on betraying them. She had killed them because the situation changed and letting them go would have been risky. The Saint felt no guilt about it. She merely had no reason to inconvenience herself by keeping her promise.

“So what are you going to do?” Through the transmitter, the Saint sounded as if she were enjoying this.

They had struggled mightily, and just when they thought they had finally defeated her, she plunged them into failure. Nothing made her happier than forcing them to face a hopeless puzzle they could never solve. However...

“On the contrary!”

The Saint had failed to consider that there was a villain in the world who excelled at tricking malicious opponents.

“What...?”

When the Saint heard the intruder suddenly invading the office, her face tensed slightly. There were several monitors around the room connected to security cameras inside the castle. She could see Lud, Sven, Mary Ville and the others in the large hall, *Verne 1* on standby for launch, and the control room with the destroyed equipment where the dead bodies of the staff members lay scattered. Static coursed across one screen. A face appeared there.

“Hello, hello, hello! How have you been?!” It was Daian “The Sorcerer” Fortuner. “Can you see me? Can you hear me? Hey, Saint! I’m a worthless human clown! How’s your mood now?” Daian spoke to the Saint with his affected and irritating banter.

The Saint’s voice couldn’t reach Daian. It was a one-way conversation, but Daian acted exactly as if he could hear her reaction.

“I’m sorry to do this when you appear so smug and in such fine spirits, but I must deliver bad news. I changed the flight program of that rocket you’re so proud of.”

The flight program determined the trajectory of the launched rocket and where it would drop.

“What did you say?” The Saint now looked truly tense for the first time.

“You destroyed the control room? What a mess. How could I rewrite the program?! Oh no!”

“Where?! Where did you instruct it to strike?!” The Saint knew he couldn’t hear her but she shouted at the monitor.

“I sent it up... like way, way up! So high where there’s no air! That’s right! Into space!” Perhaps Daian had predicted her reply, because he spoke with a grating voice and pointed skyward.

“No... When in the world... and *how* did you do that?!”

Daian’s interference was completely unexpected. He had disappeared immediately after arriving at Penmunde Test Site. She didn’t even know he was there.

“I’m surprised at your carelessness.” Daian continued speaking, taunting the Saint.

He removed something from his breast pocket and held it up. It was a mask, and a moment later when he fitted it over his face, he looked like a completely different person.



“You...” The Saint’s eyes widened further when she saw his disguise.

“How do you like my new rubber mask? I bet you can’t tell it from a real human face!”

It was the face of the staff member who had asked to take Sven’s body when she lost consciousness during the Saint’s occupation of the control room.

“You treat human beings like insects, so you don’t pay attention to the ones you don’t care about. You let down your guard.” Daian continued speaking as he removed the mask.

“That’s why you didn’t notice. Humans can be tricky, and you underestimated us!”

Someone else stood beside Daian. It was Marissa Haven. She was the Security Department spy who had trapped Meitzer, but she had another role to play.

“She’s a double agent I employed.”

“Uh... hi.” Unable to grasp where the camera was, Marissa was flustered. She looked like a small panicked animal.

“She cooperated with me. She fed me important information and prepared a hiding place for Svelgen, Rebecca and me. Oh, and she delivered a message from Meitzer.”

From the Saint’s point of view, Meitzer was not worth a glance. She had relaxed her guard, which gave rise to an opening.

“At last I get to strike back at you.” Daian’s smile was sarcastic but satisfied.

No one else knew the story. Daian was the lone remnant of the European Empire. His very existence had been forgotten and he had been raised by a mechanical doll, but he was here, alive in the world one thousand years later. He quite liked the present.

“Guaaahhh!” Enraged, the Saint drove her slender arm into the monitor. “Humans abandoned by God shouldn’t get haughty!” She screamed and shouted in a rage.

This was one of the few times she had openly shown anger in the last one

hundred... No, the last one *thousand* years.

“Huff... huff... huff... Not so fast! Not yet! I’m not finished! A little thing like this can’t beat me!”

The Saint made her remaining move.

In the large hall...

“Wow... I can’t believe that fraud is at it to the very end!”

Everyone had heard the exchange between Daian and the Saint through the transmitter. Sophia’s expression was unreadable.

“I didn’t know how talented Marissa is.”

Sophia had known Marissa was a double agent.

Or rather, when she found out, Daian had forced her to be his accomplice in a tricky way.

“Major Rundstadt, she’s capable of whatever she sets her mind to.” Rebecca spoke proudly to Sophia.

Rebecca had fingered Marissa for a spy infiltrating the development bureau. When she later became a double agent—right after she joined the development bureau—Rebecca had become one of her few friends in the organization.

“Anyway, is it all over?” Blitzdonner couldn’t use either of his arms and they hung motionless at his side as he asked. The Saint’s plan had certainly ended in failure. *“But what’s that girl from August going to do with us?”* He looked over at Mary Ville.

“I’m still a Greytenite. And they’ve removed their insignia.” Mary Ville pointed at the soldiers’ chests. *“I have no reason to seize you. However, I must take custody of that woman. She tried to attack the capital of August, so she must stand trial.”* She spoke with authority.

The Saint needed to face judgment and receive punishment. That was a matter of pride for Mary Ville since she was also a lawyer.

“No, not yet.” Everyone seemed to think the incident was over, but Meitzer

corrected them. “The Saint still has one option.”

“No way... The program was overwritten and *Verne 1*’s target has changed, hasn’t it?”

Daian’s countermeasure had foiled the Saint. That seemed certain. Meitzer answered Sven’s question.

“*Verne 1*’s flight system uses rezanium.”

“—!!”

Meitzer’s words were enough for Sven to understand everything.

“What does he mean?” Rebecca asked Sven, who had turned pale.

“Red girl... Or rather, Rebecca... This man and the Saint defeated you, right?”

“Why? Yeah, they thwarted me with some strange power.”

“He tampered with the rezanium reactor that’s the main generator inside us.”

The Saint and Meitzer could control the rezanium fragments.

“In other words, if she can directly interfere with *Verne 1* and control its power, she may be able to reset it!”

“What?!” Rebecca realized how dire the situation was.

“The Saint is probably headed for *Verne 1* right now.”

“That’s right.” Meitzer sighed tiredly.

“Everyone must leave here now. I’ll handle this.”

Whether the Saint’s plot succeeded or not, the blast from the launch of *Verne 1* would sweep through the test site. If they remained, their lives were in danger.

“That’s right. Everyone, evacuate right now! Red girl! Take Major Blitzdonner and get out of here! Your responsibility is to get him safely back to Jacob!”

“Wait, Sven. You yourself have to—”

“Major Rundstadt, recover Director Daian and the others. There’s a possibility he hasn’t thought about his own escape.”

“Yeah... but Sven!”

Sven was briskly giving orders. Meitzer looked uneasy.

“*You* have to run too! You don’t plan to come with me, do you?!”

“Of course I do! I still have something to ask you!”

She had come here to ask Meitzer how she could become human.

“In that case, I’ll tell you right now! It’s not hard!” Meitzer looked troubled as he spoke, but Sven raised one hand to stop him.

“I’ll ask after this is over. Otherwise, I’d have a bad conscience.”

“Sven?”

She couldn’t desert the man who claimed to be her father and was going to face possible death. That was how Sven truly felt. She had never had a parent or even known what a parent was, so she couldn’t explain this irresistible impulse in her heart.

“Then it’s decided. Sven and I will go too, Meitzer. We’re involved.”

“Yes, that’s right so—Master?!” Sven was aghast as Lud announced he would accompany them. “No, no... You must evacuate, Master! Leave the rest to me and the old guy!” Now it was Sven’s turn to be troubled.

“I can’t let you go alone. You’re my... um... wife, so...”

“Whah?!”

Sven could resist no further. On the contrary, she was a little happy.

“Huh? Wife? What’s this about now?” Mary Ville looked dismayed when she heard the word wife.

“Yeah, those two got hitched just three days ago.” Sophia didn’t consider Mary a stranger, so she explained.

“Oh, okay... um... uh... th-that’s fine! It doesn’t bother me at all!”

“You know... I think we could be good drinking buddies.”

“What do you mean?!” Mary Ville lost the serious attitude she had shown toward the Saint, and shouted with a red face.

“Aside from that...” Collecting herself, Mary Ville addressed Lud again. “Are you in your right mind, Lud? You don’t need to save the world. You’re a baker, aren’t you? Leave this to the soldiers!” Mary Ville reminded him of his resolve.

She was pointing out that he was no longer a military man, this man she had once hated because he had pretended to be a baker and deceived her family.

“Thank you, Mary.” Lud’s heart was filled with gratitude for her clumsy kindness. But there was no changing his mind now. “It isn’t a big deal. This is typical.”

“Stopping a missile launch is no big deal?”

“No, not that.” Lud wasn’t putting on a show of courage. He wasn’t acting out a grand plan to save the world.

“It’s sort of like meeting my wife’s parents.”

Mary Ville was astounded, but Lud really meant it. This was a matter he had to settle. That’s all it was.

Chapter 9: Then She Departed

Lud, Sven and Meitzer headed for the *Verne 1* launch facility to stop the Saint. Those remaining behind collected Daian and Marissa, took the surviving noncombatants, and headed for the submarine moored in the port.

“This elevator is connected to the underground launch facility.” Sven led the other two using a map of the facility. “It should take about five minutes to reach the bottom.”

The gondola sank deeper underground, clunking and rattling.

“Oh, Meitzer, are you hungry?” Lud removed a bundle from his breast pocket. “Have a bite to eat.”

It was a baked sweet... No, it was like bread baked into a biscuit shape.

“This bread keeps a long time.”

“You’re a baker through and through.”

When taking the field during war, Lud hadn’t prepared guns or knives, but bread.

“Is this *hostia*—like the sacramental host?”

It was a type of bread that existed in Europea for generations.

“No... Well, not exactly. I wanted to make a hard bread without yeast, so maybe it turned out like altar bread.”

It was called flatbread, or non-leavened bread. Tockerbrot had once become home to a stray kitten. They had named it Eris, and since cats can’t eat bread containing yeast, Lud had gone through a process of trial and error to make unleavened bread.

“It has raisins on top. It’s also highly nutritious, so it’s perfect for a packed meal.”

Because they are so nutritious, the military used raisins for many years.

“Yeah, I’ll have some. I see... Raisins? Those used to be called *rezan*.”

Holding the *hostia*, Meitzer wore a nostalgic look.

“In ancient Europea, *rezan* supposedly meant the ‘blessings of God.’”

The rezanium reactors using the ore with that name were the key to progress.

“Meitzer, there’s still something I want to ask you.”

“Can’t it wait?” Meitzer tried to put off Sven’s question, but she shook her head.

“At least let me ask before we get there.”

“Well, if it’s important... What’s your question?”

“You said you’re my father, but you also said you’re God’s avatar. So what exactly *are* you?”

Sven found it hard to believe Meitzer was deceiving her. Her heart rather than her reason told her so.

“You... Both of you witnessed the Saint’s memory of the destruction of the European Empire, didn’t you?”

God was incensed at the people of the empire for killing the woman he loved, so he annihilated everything, even destroying and then scattering himself.

“The people of the imperial capital numbered ten million. With the surrounding Shepherds, maybe a billion human beings disappeared in an instant.”

“Who *were* the Shepherds?” Lud asked.

“Shepherd was slang in the imperial capital. As the people outside continued to wait for an opening to reside in the imperial capital, the residents of the capital likened them to shepherds watching sheep all day, so it was derogatory.” Meitzer explained and then continued.

“The Saint fell in love with a young man who was a Shepherd, fled the imperial capital, and was killed. In exchange for his own destruction, God resurrected the two.”

“Yes, I’ve understood that much. But in that story, you don’t appear as the

Devil.”

There was something mysterious about Meitzer that Sven couldn’t understand.

“The people of Europea use ‘Devil’ as a metaphor for the Shepherd, because he tried to steal the girl who was an offering to God.”

“Wait a second. Then...”

Meitzer was the Shepherd?

“No, Sven. I’m not the Shepherd. I was just made in his image.”

“Huh? Um...”

Sven couldn’t respond, because she didn’t understand what he meant by “made.”

“God regretted his action. He had destroyed the world in a fit of anger and needed to help the survivors recover. He duplicated his ego, placed it inside a synthetic human he had created in the likeness of the Shepherd, and sent it into the ravaged world as his representative.”

That was the truth behind the fable of the Saint and Devil that remained today. They were not human but were beings created to restore the world God destroyed.

“I was allowed to wield the power of rezanium, the power of God, to repair the devastation, but...”

Then Meitzer stopped. The gondola had reached the underground launch facility. The space was so vast that it could have contained the entire facility above ground. The launch pad was in the center, with *Verne 1* standing like a steeple.

“This is our stop. Shall we go?”

“Wait. I still haven’t heard the important part!”

She still didn’t know how Meitzer was her father.

“I’m a copy of God and a copy of the Shepherd, so I’m a double replica. You’re a recreation of the Saint. Or rather, you’re a recreation of the child of the Saint

and Shepherd.”

“What?!”

“The remains of the Saint that Daian recovered were from the moment she was giving birth. It consisted of the Saint’s blood as well as the blood of her daughter. There’s your answer.”

“So that’s what happened?”

Sven was flooded with an indescribable longing. She knew it was a yearning for her father engraved on her soul’s data.

But...

Sven wasn’t entirely convinced.

Is that really all?

She felt an inexplicable trepidation.

“Yes, you’re both imitations. You’re shams. Fakes!” The Saint’s voice rang out.

The three braced themselves, but she didn’t appear.

“Langart! Fall back!”

Meitzer noticed it a moment before the others. He sensed the invisible blades the Saint wielded. He shoved Lud aside, but...

“Agh?!”

Instead, the blades struck Meitzer. His body split in two and he collapsed.

“That’s one down!!”

The Saint had been hiding in the shadow of the launch pad, and she stepped forward.

“I knew you would come!! I’ll finish you off before you can rewrite the flight program!!”

She moved awkwardly for one whose body looked so delicate. She deployed her invisible blades. Her strength was impossible to withstand, but...

“I see... In that case...”

Sven gathered her breath and searched in her mind for the invisible blades.

“Show them!!”

As soon as she uttered the words, the blades—which looked like whips or scythes—appeared in space.

“What?!”

The Saint was surprised, but quickly grasped how this had happened. The power of the blades was derived from rezanium. Because of God’s blessing, Sven could control rezanium.

Even if Sven can’t completely take control, she took my stealth function! How dare she?!

Sensing Sven had moved one step closer, the Saint lost her smug smile.

“So you can see it! But can you *defend* against it?!”

Summoning her stubbornness and tenacity, the Saint offered a joyous grin and aimed her blades at Sven. It was a four-way attack from above, below, left and right, all at once. Sven’s only retreat would be backwards. The Saint could then launch a strike into Sven’s left breast and dig out her rezanium reactor. That would seal the Saint’s victory. However, that attack was blocked.

“Graaah!!”

Lud drove back the four blades. He wasn’t barehanded, of course. He held Toolman’s *katana*.

“That’s...”

“We haven’t come unprepared either!”

Lud held the magnificent sword that had severed even the metal arm of the humanoid Hunter Unit Rebecca. It was strong enough to stand against the Saint’s blades.

“Wow, Master! You’ve learned swordplay as well?!”

It was a measure of Lud’s skill that he could wield the *katana*, and Sven was surprised.

“Actually, I’m better with a knife.” Lud answered with a wry smile. As a

soldier, he was accustomed to using a knife, but he had also learned swordsmanship. “Suzuka taught me how to use it but that was a long time ago.”

Suzuka was Yamato’s military attaché and Lud’s *bujutsu* instructor. Sven understood why Suzuka had found Lud so endearing. It was probably because he was a serious and hardworking student. They were only together a short time, but he had demonstrated the ability to handle the sword so she had taken a liking to him.

“Master... you’re very versatile!”

Sven remembered how Lud became a baker who took pride in his delicious products after a few years of practice. He had made some questionable life choices in the past, but he was capable of almost anything.

“So what?! Defending isn’t enough to beat me!”

Nonetheless, he possessed a human being’s sword skills. The Saint possessed a strength no human could match, while ignoring normal attack range. To fight against her, human opponents were forced to focus only on defense and could barely manage that.

“I’m aware of that!”

Creating this deadlock had been Lud’s goal.

“That’s right!”

From behind Lud, Sven glared at the Saint. Her red eyes looked directly into the Saint’s.

“What’d you say?!”

The Saint understood what Sven and Lud were hiding.

“Your power is superhuman... No... it isn’t human at all!”

The Saint had lived over one hundred years and acquired knowledge and power from the ancient empire, so she possessed physical abilities surpassing those of human beings. But, such a being could still be human.

“The source of that power... It’s the rezanium, like mine!”

Sven’s influence over the power of her invisible blades turned the Saint’s

suspicion to certainty.

“In that case, I too have God’s blessing, so I can stop you with *my* power!!”

Sven’s red eyes shone even more brightly. The Saint’s eyes also spilled red light as if resonating with them.

“Urgh... Agh?!”

The Saint began to suppress Sven’s power.

“You’re like me? But I don’t know who gave birth to you!”

Sven had become certain.

“You’re a synthetic human, just like me! You’re a *machine*!”

She proved it by touching the Saint with her power.

“What...?”

The Saint’s smile completely disappeared when she heard those words. The Saint spoke with a voice lacking any trace of humanity—coldly... colder than a doll.

“I’m a synthetic human? Like you... I’m a mechanical doll, did you say?!”

An explosive sound rang out—*bam!*—as if something had broken loose. It was the sound of Sven’s power, which was interfering with the Saint.

“Ungh!” Sven flew back from her own power’s recoil.

“You’d better take me seriously, you fake! Don’t lump us together!”

Fierce and crazy with anger, the Saint kicked off the ground and sprung toward Sven. Then she hit Sven’s face mercilessly with a tight fist.

“—?!”

Unable to cry out, Sven was bashed into the floor.

“Me... a doll?! A fake?! An imitation?! I’m not like you!! Never think that!!!”

With a ghastly face, she punched Sven over and over as if to smash her out of this world and erase her very existence.

“Why you...!!”

“Stop!!”

The Saint threw more punches, but Lud raced over to stop her. Even though she wasn't human, he couldn't be violent toward a girl. However, when that girl acted like *this*, it was a different story. Brandishing the *katana*, he moved to stop her but not go so far as to kill her.

“Don't interfere!!”

He couldn't do it. The Saint gave in to her anger, like a wild beast, without elegance or any concern for appearances. She landed a backhand blow, sending both the *katana* and Lud flying.

“M... Master!”

Seeing that, Sven tried to stand. She wouldn't let anyone harm her master. That would always be true.

“Shut up!!”

Even Sven's determination, which yielded to no opponent, couldn't stand against the Saint's wrath. The Saint used one hand to force Sven's head down, smashing her face into the floor.

“We're not the same! I... I am the only human God is supposed to love!!”

Contrary to her words, she continued pressing Sven down with monstrous strength. Attacking wasn't all. She was trying to crush Sven's head.

“I will pulverize you, you *doll*!”

The Saint was beyond anger and began to laugh crazily.

“Umph!”

Lud stood up to help Sven. The single punch from the Saint's small fist had broken a few of his ribs. There might also be damage to his internal organs. Intense pain coursed through him, but he was so panicked he didn't have time to worry about it.

“Sven!”

He had to save her but there was nothing he could do now. Even if he had been equipped with heavy weaponry, he may not have been able to defeat the

Saint. Nonetheless, he stood up and tried once more.

“Don’t you give up?!”

Sensing his approach, the Saint continued to hold Sven down with one hand as she swung her other hand in a tight fist toward Lud.

In that moment, everything in Lud’s field of vision slowed down. Due to the extreme tension, a brain secretion accelerated neural transmissions and caused an implosion of visual information. That state was called the zone. Lud heard a voice.

“What’s wrong, Langart? I showed you how to do it!”

It must have been an auditory hallucination. It was the voice of his former friend—and former enemy—a man no longer alive. It was Genitz’s voice.

At the last moment, he avoided the Saint’s flying fist. Even though the Saint wasn’t human, she had human form, therefore the principle was the same.

Budo was the ultimate defensive art developed by an island nation in the east. It was a god-like art for maneuvering an opponent’s strength. Suzuka was a distinguished expert, but Genitz had also been proficient in the skill. Lud now hit the Saint with *Budo*.

“What?!”

When her own strength was turned back on her, the Saint flew through the air. Her hands and feet didn’t touch the ground. She was airborne. The technique had been delivered so perfectly even the Saint didn’t understand what had happened and was slow to respond. Her left side was wide open.

“Graaahhh!”

This might be his only chance to deliver a blow. He struck with all the strength he had.

Ryuku was a technique from eastern *bujutsu*.

Its force could reach into the recipient’s internal organs and cause direct damage, no matter how thick her armor or how tough the protective muscles.

“Guh!”

The Saint's face froze. She spit blood and collapsed on the spot.

"Blood...?"

Sven looked as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing as the Saint coughed up red blood, which didn't flow through mechanical dolls.

"What the...? Are you... a real human?"

The *ryuku* Lud had released would damage the human heart. It could not work against someone without a heart, much less a machine.

"I told you... you're a *fake*."

Despite the intense pain that felt like an unseen dragon's claws raking through her insides, the Saint spoke with hate.

"I am... human. I'm different... from you!!"

Once upon a time, the people of Europea killed the Saint and invited God's wrath. That was not the only sin they committed.

"If the Saint is dead, but we provide a replacement, God will be satisfied."

They cultivated cells from the Saint's body and made a copy. God abandoned them because of that act, which treated life without due respect. The empire was destroyed and all life turned to pillars of salt, but God overlooked one individual because she too was a victim. It was the copy of the Saint. The unfortunate copy was left all alone.

"God chose me! In that empire of fools, I alone was allowed to live! I am righteous! I am the chosen one! I'm different from the rest! I am God's only beloved in this world!!"

Tearing out her hair, the Saint ranted and raved. Her beautiful hair was scattered across the floor. She looked down on human beings because God had abandoned them. She looked down on Sven as a fake because as the Saint, she was proud of *herself*.

"But you're the *replacement*, aren't you? No, maybe you aren't even *that*?"

“Silence!”

Her face contorted by anger, the Saint kicked Sven in the face.

“Gagh!”

Sven rolled across the floor.

“Ngah!”

The Saint’s heart had been injured by Lud’s blow, and she was gravely wounded.

She clawed at her chest and moaned in pain.

“Aaagh!!”

The dress she wore was shredded.

“?! ”

Sven and Lud were silent when they saw what was beneath her clothes. Countless mechanical parts were connected where she should have had breasts. All sorts of mechanisms—cogs, screws, bearings, bolts and cylinders—had been pieced together like a chimera to form a human doll.



“You... What is all that?!”

Sven was a mechanical doll, but she was at a loss for words when she saw the Saint was *more* mechanical than she was herself.

“Uaaagh!!”

The Saint did not answer. She plunged her hand into her own chest and pulled something out.

“I don’t need this anymore!!”

She then scornfully cast aside a lump of flesh enclosed in layers of auxiliary machinery. It was her *heart*.

“I shouldn’t have clung to it... It just gets in the way!!”

The Saint’s breathing calmed. Of course. Her heart, with all its despair, was now gone.

“In order to remain human, you changed your body into a machine.”

Without a doubt, the Saint was human. She was a human survivor of the world’s annihilation one thousand years ago. She had been sealed away, but she had been alive for a few hundred years. It was unusual for a human being to live such a long time.

“You replaced the failing parts of your body with machinery. That’s how you lived so long.”

How much that was left of her was human? Even after ripping out her heart, the Saint was moving without any difficulty, so it was certain that few of her human parts remained.

“Yes, that’s why I’m different from you. I’m human! Even if all that’s left is part of my brain... I’m not a mechanical doll and a copy like you!! I’m *real*!”

Sven had been made using machinery to replace a human being. The Saint had stayed alive using machinery to substitute all parts that had once been human. One was a machine that was very close to a human being and the other was a human being much closer to a machine. They were exact opposites; contrasting beings who were intermediaries between human and machine.

“God loves me. That’s why it was my mission to have God return to the world! Until that happens, I’ll do anything I have to not to die!”

The True System—the super crystallized calculation device that was God—had already fragmented and scattered across the continent in the form of rezero. She wanted that God to be whole again.

The task was tremendous, like finding grains of sand in the ocean in order to turn them back into a mountain. It would only be possible when human science and civilization had advanced to surpass the ancient great empire.

“That’s why I’m leading you... the ones God abandoned. Why don’t you understand that?! Because you’re stupid and you can’t help it!” she raged and sneered.

Ongoing stimulation through war would force humanity to evolve and develop. That was the Saint’s plan. It was like forced cultivation by providing excessive nutrients. Humankind couldn’t keep up with the rapid development of civilization and would be destroyed.

That didn’t matter to the Saint. If she could bring God back, she didn’t care if she destroyed human civilization and killed hundreds of thousands, millions, or hundreds of millions in the process.

“I’m sick of dealing with you! There is something I have to do!”

The Saint turned her back on them and walked toward *Verne 1*. Launch preparation was complete, so it was ready to lift off. But first she needed to rewrite the flight program.

“I won’t let you!!”

Lud leapt to stop the Saint.

“Shut up!”

She knocked him away with one blow.

“Master!!”

Sven wanted to run to him, but her legs wouldn’t cooperate. Her skeletal framework had been damaged in the fighting.

“Stay here and struggle. Either way, when *Verne 1* takes off, this whole area will be wasted. Isn’t that good? It’ll be an easy death.”

Firing a giant object to an extremely high altitude required an explosion of chemical fuel. The large-scale combustion would release an explosive flame and a blast at the launch. Human beings and even humanoid Hunter Units would not escape without damage.

“W... wait!”

Lud had collapsed. He called out, coughing blood, but the Saint would not stop. She calmly walked toward the launch pad until she reached the tip of *Verne 1*, which housed the flight instrumentation.

“Umf!”

She opened a maintenance hatch and peered inside. A rezanium reactor glowed red. All she had to do now was rewrite the program and evacuate to a safe place via the same elevator Sven’s group had arrived in.

“This is the end.”

“Yes, for you and me *both*.”

“?!”

The Saint was cornered. She had lived a long time and this was the first time she had been up against such a wall.

“You...!!”

When she turned around, it was too late. She had cut Meitzer in half but he had repaired himself, picked up Toolman’s fallen *katana*, and now stood before her.

“You Devil!!”

“Grarrgh!”

Meitzer charged, and the tip of the *katana* stabbed the Saint’s chest.

“It’s no use. There’s nothing in there.”

The Saint had already removed her own heart.

“I know!”

Meitzer didn't stop. He pushed the blade further, impaling the Saint's body, pushing her inside *Verne 1*'s maintenance hatch, and pinning her inside.

“What are you doing?!”

“You'll take a trip to space yourself!”

“What're you... NO!!”

It had been close. He had only been able to outfox the Saint because Lud and Sven had maneuvered her into such a tight spot.

“Don't be ridiculous! *Verne 1* is a missile! It isn't made for human passengers! If it launches like this...”

Only a few minutes remained until ignition. The shock from the launch would sever her body into pieces or the missile would carry her into space, flinging her into a world without water or air and certain death.

“Yes, that's right. That's why I can't let you go alone. I'll go with you.”

“What? Give me a break!!”

Insane with rage, the Saint screamed and struggled, but no matter how much she was cut, he would not let go of the *katana* that held her in place.

“Sven!” He called to his daughter outside. “Hurry and run away with Langart!”

If they boarded the elevator now, they might still survive. It would at least improve their chances.

“What about you?!” Hearing his command, Sven shouted back.

“Don't worry!”

“Well, I *do* worry!!”

Sven understood what Meitzer was trying to do. He had chosen to die and take the Saint with him.

“But you don't need to. This is *my* wish. Oh, and as for how you can become human...” He finally could answer the question that she was desperate to know. “You just have to wish!”

“Wish?”

Sven was puzzled as Meitzer continued.

“Have you forgotten? With the blessing of God, you can control anything derived from rezanium. Your body is no exception!”

Even now, the power of the rezanium circulated through Sven’s body.

“Give yourself a command. Just say ‘Become human!’ That’s the answer. You’ve had it all along!”

The power of Europea’s God turned ten million people into pillars of salt overnight. A miraculous power capable of transforming substances just might change a mechanical body into a human body.

“Get going with Langart! So long!!” Shouting his last words, Meitzer closed the maintenance hatch.

“What are you—?!”

“Sven... let’s go.” Sven was stunned, so Lud pulled her to the elevator. He didn’t want her final memory of Meitzer to be his death.

A vibration seized the launch pad. *Verne 1* shifted into launch mode. A lifeless electronic voice began a countdown. The two jumped into the gondola and pressed the button to take them up. It began moving, but the launch vibrations shook it violently. The engine ignited and the shaking worsened. The rumbling was so loud they couldn’t hear their own voices.

“How... could you do that, Dad?” Sven shouted through a deluge of tears. She knew he couldn’t hear her, but she shouted anyway.

Over the sea, three kilometers from Penmunde Test Site...

Sophia, Daian and the others watched *Verne 1*’s smoke trail extend into the sky from the deck of the surfaced submarine.

“Did they fail?”

Thinking they had been unable to prevent the launch, Sophia sounded disappointed.

“No, Major Rundstadt. Based on the launch angle, *Verne 1* is on an exoatmospheric trajectory, not a ballistic trajectory.”

Rebecca had sophisticated observation sensors, so she had quickly calculated the missile’s trajectory.

“They were able to prevent the rewriting of the flight program. For now, that’s good, but...”

It was the first rocket launch in modern civilization. Its scale was far beyond what Sophia had imagined.

“We could feel the shock from the launch all the way out here, so the explosion directly underneath must have been overpowering.”

Evacuating the people at Penmunde Test Site had barely succeeded. If they had left even a little later, and if they had not reached a safe distance in the sea as Daian advised, who knows what would have happened?

“I hope Lud and Sven are all right!”

“There must be several evacuation areas inside the test site. Otherwise, the staff participating in the launch would all die. So they’re probably okay.”

Sophia looked worried as Daian spoke to her. If they were able to evacuate, there was a chance they survived.

“What do you mean probably? Why probably?!”

“Sophia, you’re scaring me!! Stop pulling me by the collar! I can’t breathe!”

Sophia was so upset she seemed ready to strangle him to death, shaking him by the collar back and forth and left and right.

“Even if they do come back alive, there may be even bigger trouble.”

As Blitzdonner spoke, he gazed at the rocket’s trail soaring high into the sky.

“Yes, that’s right.” Suzuka agreed with a sad look on her face.

“What do you mean?” Sophia was perplexed.

A few minutes later...

Verne 1 had surpassed first astronautical velocity, traveled one hundred kilometers over the earth, and reached the outer atmosphere. There was no air, water or gravity at that altitude. It was a lifeless world looking down upon a blue planet overflowing with life. The Saint and Meitzer were still alive.

“What a foolish thing you’ve done!” The Saint spoke from where she was still impaled to the wall by the *katana*.

Verne 1 was a ballistic missile. It was not designed for passengers, of course. The shock of the launch would have crushed a human body, but these two had survived. However, there was no water, no food, and no way to return to the earth. They were currently still getting light from the sun but they would soon enter the earth’s shadow. In the vacuum of space, the temperature would fall below -200 degrees Celsius. No life form could survive at that temperature. Before they died of starvation, thirst or suffocation, the Saint and Meitzer were certain to freeze to death.

“I’ve known you a long time. One thousand years ago, you and I were supposed to carry out God’s atonement.”

Before their certain death, the two were talking as if they had achieved enlightenment or perhaps were simply resigned to their fates.

“God ordered us to restore the world as atonement for destroying the empire.”

Later generations called them the Saint and the Devil.

“You were too hasty. You thought if you returned the world to its past, God would come back. I tried to stop you many times, didn’t I?”

“I would never stop. I was born so God could love me. So why wasn’t God there? Asking me to lead people abandoned by God was a bad joke.”

“Oh, I see.” Meitzer smiled.

He knew that. Nonetheless, she *had* led humanity and saved them in her own way. But, the Saint could not live forever, so she had gradually suffered mental collapse. She was afraid of dying without receiving God’s love.

“Why did you just seal me away? You should’ve killed me.”

950 years ago, Meitzer had—even at the cost of his own life—trapped the Saint inside a Door as madness gripped her further each day.

“I could never do that.” As if embarrassed, Meitzer scratched his head.

“Why? Tell me.”

“Well... I couldn’t kill the woman I like, could I?”

“What?” The Saint’s voice was surprised and she looked uncomfortable.

“You never noticed? I’m in love with you. I have been for one thousand years. That’s why I wanted you to stop. I wanted you to see me, not him—not God!”

“That’s stupid.” The Saint shook her head.

“You’re just a *copy* of God. I want the *real* God’s love!”

The Saint’s face hardened as she spat her words back at him. But the face belonged to the Saint’s substitute.

“Yeah, that’s right... It has to be the real thing, doesn’t it?”

A drop of water floated through the air. Her tear, unable to fall without gravity, slowly drifted by.

“In the end, I... Actually, we’re *both* fakes.”

The Saint’s substitute and a copy of God.

“That’s right, but what you and I felt wasn’t fake. Something real can inhabit a copy. That’s the way it is for her, for Sven.”

A doll, a copy of a human being, felt true love.

“Right, Angela?”

“Hearing that name brings back memories.”

That was the real name of the Saint’s substitute.

“Are you hungry? Have some of this.” As he spoke, Meitzer handed her some of Lud’s *hostia* bread.

“I’m surprised you have an appetite when we’re about to die.” The Saint—Angela—took it and tore it in half.

“Here, we’ll share.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Long ago, people offered *hostia* to God as thanks for the joys of living. It was said they would divide it evenly and eat it after the festival.

“Come to think of it, what did you say your name was?”

“How mean of you! You don’t remember?” Meitzer sounded disappointed.

“I can’t help it! You change your name all the time!”

Living as he had among humans, it was difficult to use the same name for very long. Douglas Meitzer was another fake name.

“I don’t have a real name. I was given the same name as *him*, the Shepherd my body was copied from.”

“Oh... so what was his name?”

The name had belonged to the youth who met the Saint, fell in love with her, and sparked the destruction of the world. They were a normal man and woman and were happy as they lived a normal, common life.

“Lud.”

He spoke a name laden with memories and rich with the whims of fate.

“That’s...”

Angela was surprised to hear the name. Then she understood everything. She understood why the real Saint’s emotions inhabited the girl with the mechanical body. It was a simple fact.

“They both fell in love with men with the same name. Ha ha... How ridiculous.” Despite her derisive tone, Angela laughed. “Ha ha... That’s how it was? Hmf! What a ridiculous world!” She laughed as if finding something funny and enjoying herself.

“I don’t care anymore. Surprisingly, someone like you might be a good match for me.”

It wasn’t the cruel, inhuman laugh of the imitation Saint. It was a natural human laugh.

“Um, did you say something?”

When he asked, Angela mischievously stuck her tongue out at Meitzer—or rather *Lud*—and laughed.

“Never mind, dummy!”

She had a very cute smile.

Epilogue: Coco Vent D'or's Report

There was a war. It started after Wiltia, the victorious nation of the First European Great War, conducted a ballistic missile experiment. Later generations called it the Penmunde Incident. The Wiltian government claimed the demonstration was a rocket launch test, but its effect was to deepen suspicion across the European continent and other continents as well.

For the next seven years, diplomatic efforts attempted to divert a war between the pro-and anti-Wiltian nations, but they could never come to an agreement. Wiltia's former ally Noa still harbored a grudge over the mysterious disappearance of General Douglas Meitzer, so momentum steadily built among its war hawks. Tensions in both camps eventually reached the boiling point and hostilities broke out, beginning the Second European Great War.

As the result of advances in science and technology, this war was worse than the previous Great War, involving not just the continent of Europea but the entire world. The scale was not restricted to one continent, and the conflict was called a world war.

The previous conflict known as the European Great War was renamed the First Great War and the more recent conflict was named the Second Great War. The Second Great War bathed the world in destruction and carnage on a scale never experienced before. Humanity's only salvation was that the war didn't last as long as the previous war.

Some said that if it had continued for even a few more years, human society would never recover. The number of missing, injured and killed surpassed the previous war, and entire towns and countries were obliterated. But the war ended. National boundaries were redrawn. Some nations gained independence and were reborn. And, both the owner and employee of a tiny bakery went missing.

Year 935 of the European Calendar.

My name is Coco Vent d'Or. I was born in the Second Republic of Filbarneu and I am now an investigator for a war history research center affiliated with the Society of Nations. My job is to analyze the records of the Second Great War, the largest war in human history.

I began investigating Lud Langart, but over fifteen years have passed since he disappeared. It was difficult to find anyone who remembers him. In a small town called Organbaelz, a woman now runs his old shop. The bakery owner is named Milly and she apparently was Lud Langart's apprentice.

"You mention a name that brings back many memories. I'm sorry, but I don't have anything to tell you." The shop owner smiled jovially and said she didn't know anything about him.

No letters had come from him since he went missing. I asked the other villagers, but they all said the same. They didn't know anything.

It was around Thanksgiving. They treated me to an *ahorn herbst*, the shop's original and popular product baked in the shape of a horseshoe. It was delicious.

Apparently, the singer Hildegard von Hessen, known throughout Wiltia and across Europe, visits every year at this time. I wanted to see her performance, but I couldn't stay.

As a side note, the town had an unusually large population of cats.

Berun, the royal capital of Wiltia, fell under attack by allied forces during the war and was burned to the ground. Billions Trading dedicated itself to the recovery effort. The company, one of the largest in Wiltia, had stained its hands dealing in munitions during the war, but had since abandoned the weapons industry.

The chairman Shylock resigned. Organizational reform followed, and Billions became a leading force in the war recovery effort. The new chairman of the company is Shylock's grandson, Jacob, still in his twenties. The stir his appointment caused in the business world is still a fresh memory.

It's said he too lived in Organbaelz during his youth. According to rumor, he

was close friends with Lud Langart, but...

“I couldn’t say. I do wonder what happened. Where did he go?”

His face is young, but he’s already a very skilled business man. Those who attempted to use him have seen their own designs come back to bite them, over and over again. They suffered the ignominy of forced mergers.

The talented young entrepreneur smiled as he answered. “It doesn’t matter, does it? I don’t think tax dollars should go toward investigating a baker. Is that all you wanted to ask? I’m sorry, but I have a busy schedule ahead.”

It appears he is so busy because he doesn’t want his mother and father to have to be involved with running the business.

“Maybe he’s gone down south around Buzanpur. He’s not young, but perhaps he still feels like a newlywed.”

He laughed as he left the room in the company of a red-headed secretary.

I next visited a small town in the rural outskirts of Wiltia. It was originally the domain of the noble Rundstadt family. After the war, Wiltia abolished the nobility. However, former subjects still revere House Rundstadt and refer to its leader as “Lady,” a term of endearment. That lady is the former Wiltian military officer Sophia von Rundstadt. She was once Lud Langart’s superior.

“I’m sorry you came all the way out here, but I don’t know where he is now. I haven’t seen him since he left the military.”

Rundstadt is a former colonel in the principality’s military. During the war, she demonstrated ample valor. However, to buy time for friendly troops to retreat, she brought up the rear and fell prisoner to the allied forces.

After the war, she faced a military court. Instead of protecting herself, she tried to guarantee the positions and rights of the soldiers who had fought under her command. Her high-minded determination earned her respect even from the allied soldiers, her former enemies.

I sensed she was a woman of great dignity. She’s in her middle forties, but she remains single. The reason is unclear.

She has returned to her former home, where she put her family's assets in order and used them to start a foundation taking in war orphans. She looked radiant when the children called her Mama.

I spoke to many people with connections to Lud Langart. No one had news of him. Tockerbrot's former waitress has also disappeared.

The Penmunde Incident, which started the Great War, occurred at about the same time that Langart disappeared. Even now, the incident remains shrouded in mystery.

Another department is also investigating, but a complete picture has yet to emerge. A friend working in that department told me something. There is suspicion that the August Federation was involved in this incident.

After the war, August joined the Society of Nations and became a member of the security council. However, the other European nations, along with the major countries around the world, remain uneasy because of August's immense size.

Without expecting success, I submitted written questions to August's ministry of foreign affairs about Lud Langart. I received an answer surprisingly quickly. However, the response wasn't very forthcoming. What the reply amounted to was, "We don't know."

I stared closely at the final sentence, which was handwritten rather than typed.

"It is difficult to see why the individual in question requires investigation by an international organization, so it's advisable to stop the investigation."

It was a casual suggestion, but the person who included that sentence was Mary Ville Mehl, the August Federation's legislative council chairwoman and general secretary. She is effectively the supreme leader of August. Why would she go to the trouble of adding a handwritten comment? It sounds very much like a warning to stay out of the matter.

Despite that warning, I didn't halt my investigation. I was afraid. However, I

was close to the truth, so I couldn't turn back. I was on my way home one night when a luxury car pulled alongside and men in black blocked my way.

I thought, "The time has finally come."

The color of the car's license plate was one used by embassies, and the number was assigned to the Noa Embassy. Before I could wonder why this superpower was involved, I was shoved forcefully into the back seat. I was unable to cry out. That wasn't because they prevented me from making noise. I simply froze in fear and couldn't move.

"Don't worry, Miss. We do not intend to harm you." An individual in the back seat spoke in a strangely theatrical way.

"Who are you?"

"Pleased to meet you. I am Daian Fortuner."

I was shocked to hear his answer. That name had come up once in the course of my investigation. He had been an evil individual during the war.

He disappeared after the war, giving rise to theories that he was dead. But he had used his brain as a bargaining chip to defect to Noa, which had been victorious in the war. To this day, he works in research and development for Noa.

"I hear you've been sniffing around about Lud Langart."

"You know that? How are *you* involved?"

I had known he was somehow connected to the mysteries surrounding the war, but now encountering this monster, I shivered all over again.

"It's a problem for you to investigate him. A problem in many ways."

My back was drenched in sweat. Imagining what he might say next, I couldn't stop myself from trembling.

"It's time to put this to an end, but..."

"But?"

He didn't intend to do anything to me.

"Lud wouldn't like it if someone came to harm on his account." Daian laughed

as if something was very funny and my face tensed in confusion. “So I’ll tell you what happened. Someone like you won’t give up until you’ve learned it all.”

Daian told me the truth about Lud Langart. It was just a brief rundown of the key points, but they were nothing like what I might have imagined. My desire to ask questions faded and I just sat astounded.

“An ancient empire? Humanoid Hunter Units? Magic doors?” I could only repeat fragments of what he told me.

“Yes. The Saint had controlled world history from behind the scenes, but she was launched into space, and that was the end.”

It was difficult to believe, but I fired off the question I most wanted answered.

“What became of Lud Langart and that... humanoid Hunter Unit named Sven?”

“They barely got away in time but they escaped safely. However, that’s what caused the trouble.”

According to Daian, their power was too great. They had the power to control anything derived from rezanium. It was not an overstatement to say it was a power capable of controlling the world. It was truly the power of God. Various organizations would investigate what happened at Penmunde, and their treacherous hands were sure to reach Lud and Sven in time.

“So I arranged for them to leave Wiltia.”

Daian had them escape by taking the submarine given to Yamato all the way to the island nation on the eastern edge of Aesia.

“Then I falsified the reports, erased their trail, and asked everyone involved to keep their mouths shut.”

“Like the bakery owner Milly in Organbaelz, the chairman of Billions Trading and Lady Rundstadt?”

“Yes. And many others. *Many* others. Everyone cooperated willingly.”

Many people and even an enemy nation cooperated to help Lud and Sven escape to a peaceful land.

“That’s the truth. The two just wanted to live as bakers, and I made it happen.”

The truth was finally revealed. However, it greatly differed from what I had imagined.

The power of an ancient empire... A blessing from God capable of controlling the world... If I write a report with contents like that—that sound like the plot from a third-rate novel—no one would believe it.

I had a hard time believing it myself. It might actually be better to write it up as a novel. At least my boss wouldn’t yell at me.

“What will you do now?” I had no response to Daian’s question, so I just shook my head.

My investigation had to stop. I thought it was best the world remained ignorant of these events. History could handle the rest by burying the details.

“That’s all. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Daian ordered the men in black to open the car door. He must have believed I would cooperate, so he set me free.

Stepping out of the car, something still bothered me.

“May I ask one more thing?”

“Yes?”

“What are they doing now?”

Had Sven become human? How were they living in that distant country? Daian answered my question as if he found it humorous.

“They’re bakers, of course. They are out there somewhere baking bread for somebody.” He laughed like a young boy.

Then I suddenly remembered. After losing the war, many people condemned Daian Fortuner as a traitor for abandoning his nation and defecting to Noa. However, rumor has it that he cut a deal according to which the victorious nations would not brand his friends and lovers as war criminals and put them to death. It’s an unreliable rumor, but for some reason I’d like to believe it.

This is everything I learned about Lud Langart. I do not intend to make this report public. I don't intend to show it to anyone. I will keep it secret.

Even if someone happens to read this, years from now... It is likely everyone involved will have departed this world. So, this is the end.



Postscript: The Popular Waitress of Tockerbrot

Time passed. The incident turned into a record and the record became history. Over eighty years flowed by and those involved in the events that day have died.

Then... In a residential area on the edge of the capital city of an eastern island nation...

A bakery stood on the corner of the street. The shelves inside the shop were lined with bread. There were *anpan* rolls, apple danishes, jam buns, chocolate cornets, potato bread rolls and an entire corner of baked sweets with horseshoe-shaped bread and *baumkuchen*.

For some reason, the melon bread had a label that read “Pineapple Bread.”

“Anyway, bread was treated like *manju* sweets long ago, so it came to be called sweetbread. That’s why breads eaten at meals were eventually called dinner bread.” A waitress in the shop was delightedly explaining to a customer.

“Oh, really? I didn’t know that.”

This shop had supposedly been here since before the war. For many years, the local people had loved all its bread, carefully prepared and baked in the shop’s oven. Today, a girl from the local high school had come to visit.

“I recommend using this bread for cutlet sandwiches. We use a moist and sticky dough that bakes up nice and fluffy, so it’s perfect for sandwiches with strong-tasting ingredients.”

This high school girl said she was inviting a boy on a date tomorrow. She wanted to take a handmade cutlet sandwich, which she knew he liked. She had asked the waitress for advice, and the waitress was glad to help.

“It has long been said that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach! I wish you fortune in war!”

“In w-war? Ah ha ha...” The waitress’s cheerful tone confused the student.

She was famous in town. Everyone knew the popular waitress. As always, she wore a bright smile as she handed the student bread in a wrapper.

“Um...” Then the student noticed something and asked the waitress a question. “That photograph over there... Is that you?”

The wall of the shop was decorated with framed photographs. One of them showed a girl who looked exactly like the waitress. However, it was a very old black-and-white photo. It was from over half a century ago, or maybe more.

“Tee hee... No.” The waitress firmly denied it.

“That photo shows my great-grandmother when she was young. People often say we look exactly alike. But the color of our eyes is different. You can’t tell in black and white, though.”

“Oh... right. Then what about the photo beside it?”

“Well, that’s...”

The photo next to the first one showed an elderly Western couple.

“That’s my great-grandfather, who founded this shop, and my great-grandmother.”

Underneath the photo were the words, “Mr. and Mrs. Langart, 50th anniversary of their store opening.”

“They both passed away before I was born. I heard they were very close.”

The two in the photo had wrinkled faces and were happily smiling.

It’s a small bakery in a town somewhere. The shop’s name is Tockerbrot. If you come across it, I highly recommend stopping in. A charming waitress is sure to welcome you with a smile. They are eagerly awaiting your visit.



Mr. and Mrs. Langart, 50th anniversary of their store opening.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume 10 of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*!

The inspiration to write this story came from asking myself a question: If tools could think, what kind of person would they like?

Tools are made for a purpose. They're made because there's a use for them. I figured the person they would like most would be the one who used them to the fullest. That person would fulfill the reason for their existence.

So what if a tool could think and it was a young woman? She would love even someone feared and alienated for many years, like Lud Langart, because he fulfilled her. I think that was Sven at the beginning of the story.

However, even though she was created as a weapon, she abandoned that role in order to follow Lud. Then she began to wonder, worry and hesitate. She wanted him to fulfill the reason she was born, but she had abandoned that reason.

She wondered why she wanted to be with Lud. She wondered what she wanted from the future. She kept thinking as hard as she could and finally arrived at a simple conclusion.

"I want to be with him because I want to be with him."

It's a simple conclusion. She had frantically run, fought, shouted, screamed and writhed in pain only to discover that.

People suffer for only that reason. People risk their lives for only that reason. People live for only that reason. It was a great delight to write about her path toward that conclusion.

This volume completes *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*. I struggled every day to give the men and women of this series a happy ending. I think I've finally done that thanks to everyone's support.

Thanks to my editor, designer, printer, distributor and sales personnel. And thanks to the illustrator Zaza who was with me the whole way.

Above all, I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart to you, the readers, for sticking with me. Thank you very much. I truly hope we meet again somewhere.

SOW

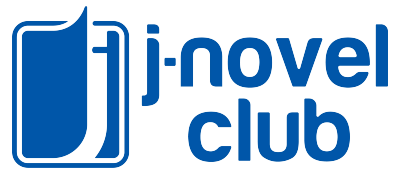


Tockerbrot









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The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress: Volume 10

by SOW

Translated by Ari and John Werry / HC Language Solutions, Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2021

Premium Ebook